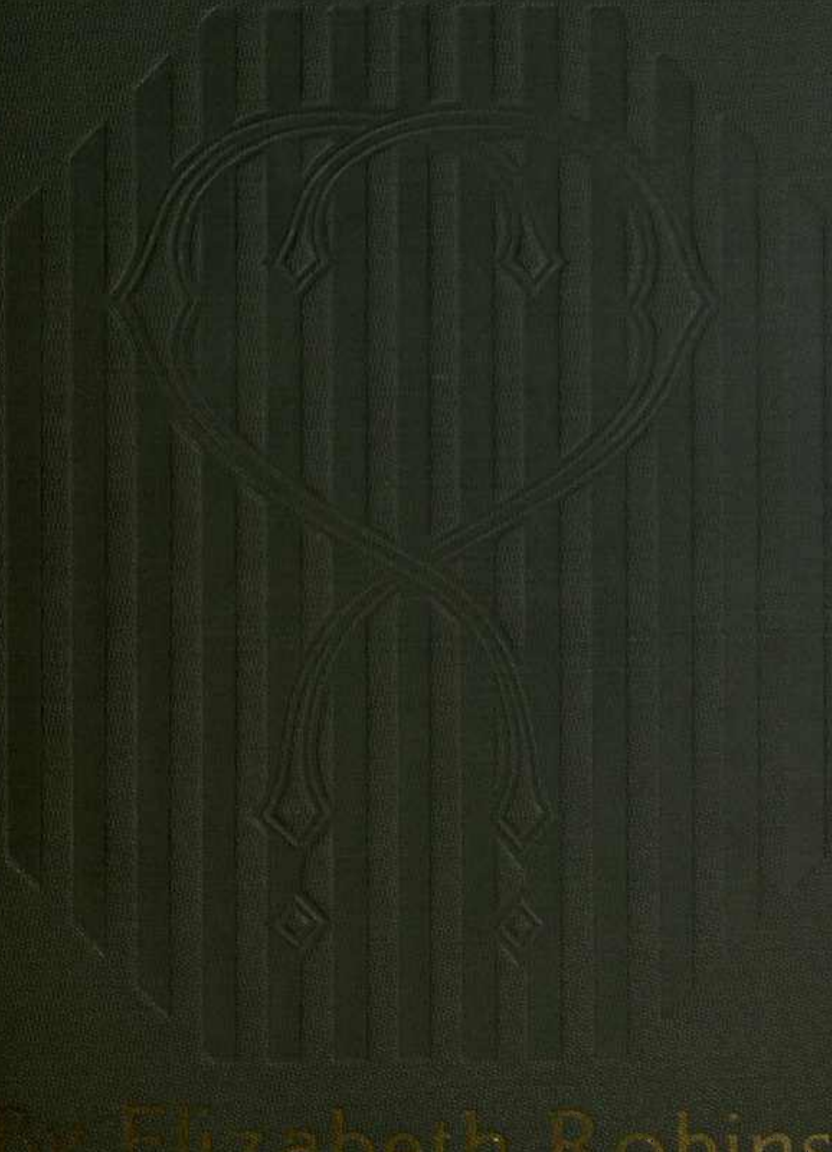
My Little Sister



by Elizabeth Robins

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Josephine P. Emmett – 45

1913 –

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MY LITTLE SISTER

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

GEORGE MANDEVILLE'S HUSBAND
THE NEW MOON
THE OPEN QUESTION
BELOW THE SALT
THE MAGNETIC NORTH
THE DARK LANTERN
COME AND FIND ME
(PUBLISHED BY WILLIAM HEINEMANN)
THE CONVERT (METHUEN)
VOTES FOR WOMEN: A Play in Three Acts (MILLS & BOON)
THE FLORENTINE FRAME
(JOHN MURRAY)
WOMEN'S SECRET
(WOMAN'S PRESS, LINCOLN'S INN HOUSE, KINGSWAY)
WHY?
(WOMAN'S PRESS, LINCOLN'S INN HOUSE, KINGSWAY)
UNDER HIS ROOF
(WOMAN WRITER'S LEAGUE, 12 HENRIETTA ST.)

MY LITTLE SISTER

BY

ELIZABETH ROBINS

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1913

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MY LITTLE SISTER

CHAPTER I

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

SHE is very fair, my little sister.

I mean, not only she is good to look upon. I mean that she is white and golden, and always seemed to bring a shining where she went.

* * * * *

I have not been able, I see, to set down these few sentences without touching the quick.

I have used the present and then fallen to the past. I say " is " and then, she " seemed." And I do not know whether I should have written " was " or " seems."

And that, in sum, is my story.

* * * * *

We were both so young when we went to Duncombe that even I cannot clearly remember what life was like before.

Whether there was really some image left upon my mind of India, or my father in a cocked hat, looking very grand on a horse, or whether these were a child's idea of what a cavalry officer's daughter must have seen, I cannot tell. I do not think I imagined the confused picture of dark faces and a ship.

My first clear impression of the world is the same as Bettina's. A house, which we did not yet know as small, set in a place which still is wide and green.

As far back as we remember it at all, we remember roaming this expanse; always, in the beginning, with our mother. A region where we played with the infinite possibilities of existence—from the discovery of a wheat-ears' hidden nest, to the apparition of a pack of hounds on the horizon, followed by men in red coats and ladies in sober habit, on horses that came galloping out of the vague, up over the green rim of the world, jumping the five-barred gate into Little Klaus's meadow, and vanishing in a pleasant fanfare of horn, of baying and hallooing, leaving us standing there in a stirred and wonderful stillness.

We seldom met anyone afoot in those days except, now and then, the cottager who lived in a thatched hut down in one of the multitude of hollows. We called him "Kleiner Klaus," because he had one horse of his own, and because sometimes in the paddock four others grazed and kicked their heels. And he was little and shrewd-looking, and used to smile at Bettina.

To be sure, everyone smiled at Bettina.

And Bettina would show her dimple, and nod her shining curls, and pass by like a small Princess, scattering gold of gladness and goodwill.

Though we children looked on Kleiner Klaus as a friend, years went by before we dared so much as say good-morning to him. Anyone else found at large in our green dominions was an enemy.

So much we learned before we learned to speak our mother tongue, and all in that first lesson, so far as I was concerned. A lesson typified in the figure hurrying to the rescue down the flagged path toward the gate. My mother! . . . who had moved through all our days with changeless calm. And now she was running so fast that her thick hair was loosened. A lock blew across her face.

Mélanie, our nurse, stood inside the gate with Bettina in her arms. A lady leaned over, asking the way to the Dew Pond. Mélanie could not even understand the question. But I knew all about the Dew Pond. I had been there with my mother to look for caddis flies. So I pointed to the knoll against the sky, and stammered a direction. Bettina was of no use to anyone looking for the Dew Pond. But she quickly took her place as the centre of interest. All that she did to make good her Divine Right was to show her dimple, and point a meaning finger at the jewelled watch pinned to the stranger's gown. The lady held out her hands to our baby. Bettina consented to be taken nearer to the sparkling toy.

Then our mother, as I say, hurrying out of the house as though it were on fire, taking the baby and the nurse and me away in such haste, I had no time to finish telling the lady how to find the Dew Pond.

I heard my mother, who was commonly so gentle, telling the nurse in stern staccato French if ever it happened again she would be sent away. Never, never was she to allow anyone to touch our baby. Had the strange woman kissed Bettina?

The new nurse lied.

And I said no word.

But the impression was stamped deep. No one outside the family at Duncombe was ever to kiss Bettina. Or even to kiss me—which I remember thinking a pity.

Moreover, I perceived that if, through the ignorance or the wickedness of stranger-folk, this thing were to happen again, one would never dare confess it.

For such a catastrophe the far-sighted Bon Dieu had provided the refuge of the lie.

CHAPTER II

LESSONS

THERE was one lasting cloud upon a childhood spent as close to our mother as fledglings in a nest.

Our mother was the most beautiful person we had ever seen. Even as quite young children we were dimly conscious of the touch of pathos in the beauty that is frail, as though we guessed it was never to grow old. But this was not the cloud. For the presentiment was too undefined, it came in a guise too gentle to give us present uneasiness.

In the unquestioning way of children, we accepted the fact that one's mother should be too easily tried to join in active games. But she taught us how to play. She was as much a factor in our recreation as in our lessons—so much so that we were a long time in finding out the dividing line between work and play. I think that must have been because our mother had a genius for teaching. The hard things she made stimulating, and the easy things she made delight.

No; there was an exception to this.

Not even my mother could make me good at music. She was infinitely patient. She made allowances for me that she never made for my sister.

Once, when I was dreadfully discouraged, I was allowed to leave my " Étude " and learn something that might be supposed to catch my fancy —a gay and foolish little waltz-tune called " The Emerald Isle."

" Oh, but quicker, child! " I hear her now. " It is not a dirge."

I began again—*allegro,* as I thought.

But " Faster, faster! " my mother kept saying, till I dropped my hands.

" How *can* I? You expect me to be as quick as God! "

I think this must have been after that act of His which gave us a sense of surpassing swiftness. For long I blamed my lack of skill upon my fingers; they were as stiff as Bettina's were elastic. She kept always the hand of a very young child—so soft and pliant that you wondered if there were any bones in it at all until you heard the firm tone in her playing, and saw the way in which, when she was stirred, she brought down the flying hands on some rich, resolving chord.

Years after I was still able only to practise, Bettina "played." And better even than her playing was Bettina's singing. That began when she was quite a baby. I see her now, a small figure, all white except her green shoes and her hair of sunset gold, singing; singing a nursery rhyme to an ancient tune my mother had found in one of her collections of old English song:

"Where are you going to, my pretty maid?"

We thought this specially accomplished of Bettina, because it was the first thing she sang in English.

I do not remember how we learned French. It must have been the first language that we spoke. Our mother, without apparent intention, kept us to the habit of talking French when we did the pleasantest things. All the phrases and verbal framework of our games were French; all the mythology stories were in French.

And we seemed to fall into that tongue only by chance when we went collecting treasures for our herbarium, or the fresh-water aquarium.

We found out by-and-by that the walks we thought so adventurously long were little walks. We also found that our world was less uninhabited than we thought. Duncombe, we discovered, stood midway between two large country houses. Besides the cottage of Kleiner Klaus, there were other small peasant holdings, dotted like islands in our sea of green—brave little enclosures made, as we heard later, by the few who refused to be wholly dispossessed when, in the eighteenth century, the open heath had been taken from the people.

Our own Duncombe, which we thought very grand and spacious, had been only a superior sort of farmhouse.

Everyone has marked the shrinkage in those nobler spaces we knew as children. In our case, not all imaginary, the difference between what we thought was " ours " and what, for the time being, was. We never doubted but the boundless heath belonged to us as much as our garden did.

We were confirmed in our belief by the attitude of our mother towards those persons detected in daring to walk " our " paths, or touch our wildflowers, or, worst crime of all, disturb our birds.

The proper thing to do, on catching sight of any stranger, was to start with an aversion suggested by our mother's, but improved upon—more pictorial. We would all three stare at the intruder, and then allow our eyes to travel to the nearer of the signs, "Trespassers," etc. If this pantomime did not convince the creature of the impropriety of his presence, we would look at one another with wide eyes, as though inquiring: "Can such things be? Are these, then, deliberate criminals? If so"—our looks agreed—"the company of outlaws is not for us." We turned our backs and went home. I was twelve before I realised that we ourselves were trespassers.

The heath belonged to Lord Helmstone.

That was a blow.

Still worse, the later knowledge that Duncombe House and garden were not our own. The laying out of a golf course, and the cheapening of the motor-car, forced the facts upon our knowledge. But I am glad that as little children we did not know these things. We saw ourselves as heiresses to the prettiest house and garden in the world. And no whit less to those broad acres rolling away—with foam of gorse and broom on the crests of their green waves—rolling northward towards London and the future.

Two miles to the south was our village—source of such supplies as did not come direct from Big Klaus, or from Little Klaus. We knew the village, because when we were little we went to church there. Big Klaus, the red-faced farmer, who had a great many collie dogs and nearly as many sons, drove us to church in a dog-cart. The moment the squat tower came in view Bettina and I would lean out to see who would be the first to catch sight of Colonel Dover. He was nearly always waiting near the lych-gate to help my mother out of the cart. One or two other people would stop to speak as we came or went. Often they asked, Would she come to a garden-party? Would she play bridge? Would she help with a children's school-treat?

And she never did any of these things.

Bettina and I liked Colonel Dover till we overheard something Martha Loring said to the cook. Both women seemed to think my mother was going to marry him! Bettina was too young to mind much. Besides, he had beguiled Bettina with chocolate.

I was furious and miserable.

I said to myself that, of course, my mother would never dream. . . . But the servants gossip poisoned all the time of primroses that year. I thought about little else in our walks.

Once we met him. Something began that day to whisper in the back of my head: "If he asks her enough she might give in. She does to me when I persist."

Out of my first great anxiety was born the beginning of my knowledge of my mother's character.

I could see that she, too, was afraid of giving in.

But afraid of contest quite as much. Afraid of—I knew not what. But I knew she stayed away from church, because she was afraid. I knew our walks were different, because we were always thinking we might meet him.

I prayed God to give my mother strength—for Christ's sake not to let it happen. Morning and night I prayed that prayer for half a summer.

Dreadful as the issue was, I was thankful afterwards that I had taken the matter in hand.

CHAPTER III

A THUNDER-STORM

Two Sundays in succession we had not been to church. As we were going out, after lessons, on Monday morning, a thunder-storm came on. So Bettina and I played in the upstairs passage. I remember how dark it grew, although there was a skylight overhead, and a window opening on the staircase. We groped for our playthings in the twilight, till quite suddenly the *croisée* of the casement showed as ink-black lines crossing a square of blue-white fire.

The shadowy stair was fiercely lit; our toys, too, and our faces. The moment after, we sat in blackness, waiting for the thunder. Far off it seemed to fall clattering down some vast incline. Then the rain. Thudding torrents that threatened to batter in the skylight.

Our mother came out of her room in time to receive the next flash full upon her face. I see the light now, making her eyes glitter and her paleness ghostlike.

She drew back from the window. Before the lightning died I had seen that she was frightened. I had been frightened, too, till I saw that she was. In the impulse to reassure her, my own fear left me. I went to her in that second blackness and put my hand in hers. When I could see again I looked through the streaming window-pane, as we stood there, and I saw a man sheltering under the chestnut-tree at our gate. He lifted his umbrella, and seemed to make a sign: "May I come in?"

"Why, there is Colonel Dover!" I said, and could have bitten my tongue. My mother had moved away. She seemed not to hear, not to have seen.

I stood, half behind the curtain, praying God to keep him out. I prayed so hard I felt my temples prick with heat, and a moisture in my hair. A blinding flash made us start back. Almost simultaneously came a shock of sound like a cannon shot off in the house. We three were clinging together.

"That struck near by," my mother said, to our relief, for we had thought the house must tumble to pieces. The storm slackened after that, and daylight struggled back. We went on with our playing. I noticed, as my mother went downstairs, that she kept her head turned away from the window.

Presently we heard unaccustomed sounds in the hall. The tramping and scraping of heavy feet. We looked over the banisters and saw a man being carried in by Kleiner Klaus and our gardener. The man's clothes were wet, so were his face and hair. It was Colonel Dover, staring with fixed, reproachful eyes at the lady of Duncombe House. And my mother, with a look I had never seen on her face, stood holding open the drawing-room door for the bearers to pass.

Their feet left muddy marks in the hall. . . .

We did not go downstairs till late that afternoon, when the body had been taken away.

People said the steel ferule of the umbrella had attracted the electric current.

I knew God had heard my prayer.

But in striking down my enemy he had struck the chestnut-tree. It was riven from foot to crotch.

That was the day I had in mind when I excused my laboured playing: "You expect me to be as quick as God."

CHAPTER IV

NIMBUS

I SEE I have given the impression that Colonel Dover was the cloud. No. He was only a roll of thunder behind the cloud. I have put off saying more about the cloud because of the difficulty in making anyone else understand the larger, vaguer threat on our horizon.

Those early days, as I have said, were happy and warmly sheltered. Yet there was all about us, or hovering near ready to swoop down, a sense of fear.

I hardly know how we came first to feel it as a factor in life. A thousand impressions stamped the consciousness deep and deeper still. A fear, older than the fear of Colonel Dover, and apart from any danger with a name. A thing as close to life as the flesh to our bones.

We were safe there, on our island in the heathery sea, only as people are safe who never trust themselves to the treachery of ships.

My mother seemed to hug the thought of home as those in old days who heard a wolf howl gave thanks for the stout stockade.

More times than I can count I have seen her coming home from one of our walks with that look, half dreaming, half vague apprehension. I have seen her turn that look back on Bettina, lagging: "Soon home, now, little girl. Soon safe in our dear home."

I remember the look of the heath, at dusk, on winter days. The forbidding grey of the sky. The clammy chill. A white fog coming out of the hollows—a level mist; not rising high at first, but rolling nearer, nearer, like the ghost of an inundating sea. All the familiar things taking on an unreal look. A silence, and a shivering. Sometimes the dull oppression broken by a birds' note. Harsh and sudden. A danger signal.

I see us linking arms and, with our mother between us, so mend the pace that she would reach home almost breathless. Nevertheless, we would hurry indoors and shoot the bolt behind us like people who knew themselves pursued.

Perhaps my mother's fear had grounds we children never knew. But we knew that the sound of a door shut, and a bolt shot, was music in her ears. Her changed "home" face was like summer come again. She would help us to strip off our wraps, and, all in a glow, we would go flying to the haven of our pretty fire-bright room with its gay chintzes, its lamps and flowers. One of us would ring for tea; another would draw chairs about the blaze. My mother's part was to close the heavy inside shutters, to let down across the panels the iron bar, and draw the curtains.

"*Now* we are safe and sound!" she would say.

I do not pretend to explain, for I do not know how it was that, though we loved our walks, Bettina and I came to share her sense of danger.

In the beginning we may have felt the flight home to be merely a kind of game. A playing at Prisoner's Base with the threshold of Duncombe House for goal. When we reached there (and only in the nick of time!) we had escaped our enemy, whether Colonel Dover or another. We had won. We had barred him out.

That feeling lasted warm, triumphant, until bed-time. Then, heavy wooden shutters, even with iron all across, were no avail. Another enemy, craftier, deadlier than any that might haunt the heath at dusk, had got into the house. He was in hiding all the cheerful part of evening, when lights and voices were about. At bed-time, in dim passages, you felt his breath on the back of your neck. He never faced you. Always he was behind you. But he was never at his deadliest while you had your shoes and stockings on. He waited behind curtains or under the bed, to clutch at your bare feet as you jumped in.

I try not to read into the influences about our childhood more than was there.

Perhaps our fears had no obscurer origin than the humble domestic fact that my mother never trusted the servants with the locking-up of the house. We saw her go the rounds each night, holding a candle high to bolts, or low to locks and catches. I believe now she may have had only some natural fear, in that lonely place, of robbery. But for us children the Dread was harder to fight against, being bodyless.

As everyone knows, except those most in need of knowing—I mean children—every old house is an orchestra of ghostly sound. One room at Duncombe, in particular, was an eerie place to sit in when the winds were out. You heard a kind of unearthly music played there on winter evenings. Sounds so remote from any whistling, moaning, or other wind instrumentality, that Bettina and I spoke of it in whispers: "Now the organ's playing."

Our mother heard it, too. At the first note she would lift her eyes and listen. We had an obscure feeling that she heard more than we—a something behind the music. Something which we strained to catch, and often seemed upon the verge of understanding.

There is no more characteristic picture of my mother in my mind than that which shows her to me with needle arrested over work slipping off her knee, or holding a page half-turned, her lifted face wearing that look, listening, foreboding.

There is something more expressive in the white of certain eyes than in the iris. The white of my mother's eyes was a crystalline blue-white. It caught the light and glistened. It seemed to respond more sensitively, to have more "seeing" in it than was in the pale blue iris. The contrast of heavy dark lashes may have lent the eye that almost startling look when the fringe of shadow lifted suddenly, and the eyeball answered to the light.

There was nothing the least tragic about my mother's usual looks or moods. She was merely gentle and aloof.

She helped us to be very happy children; and if she made us sometimes most unhappy, she did so unconsciously. And she did so only at times when she must have been unhappy, too.

She played for us to dance. And she played for us to sing. But after Bettina and I had gone through our gay little action songs, and after we had sung all together our glees and catches, we would be sent upstairs to do lessons in the morning-room—which was our schoolroom under the cheerfuller name.

Then, sitting alone, between daylight and dark, our mother would sing for herself songs of such sadness as youth could hardly bear. I think we were not expected to hear them. We would open the windows on that side in mild weather to hear the better. But the songs were sadder when we heard them faintly. Have you ever noticed that?

I would sit trying to fix my mind on lessons, listening to that music she never made for us.

And I would look across at Bettina's face, all changed and overcast.

Then I would shut the window.

Bettina ought never to hear such music.

For myself I wondered uneasily what there could be in the beautiful world to inspire a song like that, and to make a lady sit singing it "between the lights."

As I say, when the sound was fainter the sadness of it pierced us deeper still.

As we two sat there, formless fears crept in and crouched in the shadowy places.

Oh, we were glad when Martha Loring's face appeared, with the lamp and consolatory suggestions of supper.

Better still, the blessed times when the music was too sad even for our mother—when she would break off and come to find us—help us to hurry through our task, and then for reward (hers, or ours? . . . I never quite knew) open the satinwood cabinet, and take out the treasures and let us see and handle them. All but two. We had been allowed to hold our father's order and his watch. We had turned over the pretty things he had given her; we knew that I was to have the diamond star, when I grew up, and Betty was to have the pearl and emerald pendant. Only the two brass buttons we might never touch.

We never knew why the brass buttons were so precious. She held them wonderfully—as though they were alive.

And we, too—we were always happier after we had seen them.

We knew that she felt, somehow, safer.

So did we.

CHAPTER V

THE MOTHER'S VOW

WE had no knowledge at first hand, of any family life except our own. But we imagined that we made up for any loss in that direction by following the outward fortunes of one other family, from a reverent distance, but with a closeness of devotion.

In that mysterious world beyond the heath, we divined two exhaustless springs of enthusiasm: the Army and the Royal Family.

The reason for the first is clear.

As for the second, we never guessed that our varied knowledge and intimate concern about the persons of the reigning house was a commonplace in English family life of the not very strenuous sort.

Royal personages presented themselves to our imagination, partly as the Fairly Tale element in life, partly as an ideal of mortal splendour, partly as symbols of our national greatness.

From fairy queens and princes no great step to the sea-king's daughter, or to her sailor-son, the Prince of Wales. His wife, that Princess of Wales, who even before her marriage had been the idol of England was our idol too—apart from her high destiny as mother of the future King, (the little Prince born in the same year as Bettina)—and mother of that fascinating figure in the story, the solitary Princess of her house, three years younger than the youngest of our family. Our interest in them all received a fresh accession at the birth of Prince Henry; we hailed the advent of Prince George; we felt the succession trebly sure in the fortunate arrival of Prince John. We saw them safely christened; we consulted the bulletins in the *Standard* and the *Queen* about their health; we followed their august comings and goings with an enthusiasm undampened by hearing how well they were all being brought up on the incomparable "White Lodge" system, which had been so successfully applied to the little royalties' mamma.

Apart from these Shining Ones, a sense of the variety, the unexpectedness of life to lesser folk, reached us through the changing fortunes of one of the country-houses that abutted on the heath.

It was let to different people, from time to time, for the hunting. If the people had children, they were of palpitating interest to us, even though we never saw much of the children.

Sometimes the fathers and mothers scraped acquaintance with our mother.

If they had seen the Brighton doctor driving up to our door, they would stop to ask how my mother was.

The doctor was a grim man with a stiff grey beard. He said my mother ought to have a nurse. She said she had me.

That was the proudest moment of my childhood.

I had to try very hard not to be glad when she was ill. It was such delight to nurse her. And after all, the only thing she herself seemed to mind about being ill was not having Bettina always with her.

Bettina was too little to understand that one must be quiet in a sick room.

In any case Bettina never wanted to stay indoors. So she would escape, and run about the garden, singing. My mother made us wheel her bed to the window that she might look out. She would lie there, watching Bettina play at church-choir with all our dolls in a row, and tiny home-made hymn-books in their laps.

When a butterfly detached the leader of the choir, and Bettina went in chase to the other side of the garden, my mother would say anxiously: "Someone must go down and bring Bettina back."

I could not bear to see Loring, or Mélanie, doing anything for my mother. I think they humoured me, and that Mélanie performed her service chiefly by stealth. I know I felt it to be all my doing when the invalid was able to come downstairs.

She sat very near the fire though the day was hot. When she held up her hand to shade her eyes, her hand was different.

Not only thin. Different.

* * * * *

Bettina and I were sorry she would never see the one or two kind people who "called to inquire."

We had come early to know that her refusal to take any part in such meagre "life" as the scattered community offered was indeed founded upon "indisposition," as we had heard; but an indisposition deeper than her malady.

We never knew her to say: these card-playing, fox-hunting people are our inferiors. But she might as well. We read her thought.

When the Marley children went by on ponies, when the Reuters bought their third motor-car, Bettina and I stifled longing and curiosity with the puerilities of infant arrogance: Our mother doesn't mean to return your visit. She doesn't want us to 'sociate with your children.

In our hearts we longed for the society specially of Dora Marley. Betty used to slip out and show Alexandra to Dora. Alexandra was Betty's most glorious doll. When the others couldn't find Betty I knew where to look. I went secretly, a roundabout way through the shrubberies, to bring Betty in, reluctant and looking back at Dora: "Come again to-morrow?"

One day Dora shook her head.

"Why not?"

She was going back to school. "Aren't *you* going back to school?" she asked.

"Oh, no," I said, "we don't go to school."

Dora seemed not only surprised, but inclined to pity us.

"You *like* having to go to school!" I said.

She loved it. "So would you."

"I should hate it!" I said with a passion of conviction.

She couldn't think why.

Neither could I—beyond the fact that my mother couldn't go with me. And that she had said of the Marley children, with that high air of pity—"They have the manners of girls who have not been brought up at home."

Dora asked if we didn't hate our governess. She was still more mystified to hear we had never had one.

Even then we did not associate that lack with poverty. Rather with the riches of our mother's personal accomplishments, and her devotion for her children. And indeed we may have been partly right. I think if she had been a millionaire she would not willingly have shared with a strange woman those hours she spent with us.

We read a great deal aloud. My mother and I took turns. Bettina used to sit over the embroidery she was so good at, and I so hopeless. Or she would sit under the wild broom in Cæsar's Camp watching the birds; or lie curled up on the sofa stroking Abdul, the blue Persian. Indoors or out, I don't think Bettina often listened to the reading. Perhaps that was because we read a good deal of history. Poetry was "for pleasure," our mother said. But it had to be translated into singing to be any pleasure to Bettina. I loved it all.

Betty was two years younger than I, but nobody would believe I was not the elder by five years, or even six. I was proud of this, seeing in the circumstance my sole but sufficient advantage over a sister excelling in all things else.

I am not to be understood as having been envious of Bettina. For I recognised her accomplishments as among our best family assets—reflecting glory on us all; ranking in honour after the respect shown to our mother, and the V. C. our father won in the Soudan. But my thoughtfulness and gravity as a child, my being cast in a larger, soberer mould, lent validity to my assumption of the right to take care of Bettina. Even to harry her now and then, when her feet outstrayed the paths appointed.

Bettina was not only younger, she was delicate; she had to be protected against colds, against fatigue.

There is, in almost every house, one main concern.

When I look back, I see that in ours the main concern was Bettina. If she had been less sweet-natured, she would have been made intolerable.

But the great need of being loved kept Bettina lovable.

I cannot remember that we ever spent half a day away from each other, or away from our mother, until—but that is to come later.

I feel still the panic that fell on us after the excitement of seeing the good-natured Mrs. Reuter drive up in her motor-car—the first we had encountered at close quarters—a jarring, uncanny, evil-smelling apparition in our peaceful court. Mrs. Reuter leaned out and unfolded her dreadful errand—to invite us children to come and stay at her house in Brighton from Friday to Monday!

We stood there, blank, speechless.

Our mother, with a presence of mind for which we blessed her, said she could not spare us; she was not well; I was a famous little nurse.

Relief and pride rushed together. I could have kissed my mother's feet. My own could hardly keep from dancing.

"Let me take the little one, then," said this brutal visitor.

The little one burst into large, heart-rending sobs.

Twenty times that afternoon the little one made my mother say: "I will not let anyone take you away—no, never. Very well, you shall not pay visits."

And Betty, suspicious, insistent: "Not *never?*"

"Not never."

Oh, mother! mother! would you had kept your word!

CHAPTER VI

MARTHA'S GOING—YET REMAINING

WHEN I was thirteen years old we lost our ally, Martha Loring. She had been with us since she was fifteen—at first a little scullery-maid. Later, she was promoted, and became a person much trusted, in spite of her youth and her love of fun.

We had all sorts of games and private understandings with Martha. She was a genius at furnishing a dolls' house. She got another friend of ours to make us a dresser for Alexandra's kitchen. This other gifted person was Peter, one of Big Klaus's sons. He was almost twenty, and he used to bring the vegetables. We did not know why he could never bring us our presents at the same time—perhaps out of fear of the cook, who held strict views upon the wickedness of eating between meals. She was elderly, and very easily annoyed.

She never knew that that clever Peter circumvented her by climbing over the orchard wall with our red apples and with pockets full of the hazelnuts we loved. Martha Loring told us that, if ever we spoke of these gifts, they would be forbidden, and Peter would never come any more. So we were most careful.

So was Peter.

So careful that he brought his gifts after dark. Martha used to have to go down the garden and wait for them—wait so long, sometimes, that we fell asleep, and only got Peter's presents in the morning.

Martha had laughing brown eyes and full scarlet lips. No wonder we were impressed by the transformation of this cheerful and familiar presence into something heavy-eyed and secret. One morning she came out of our mother's room sobbing, and went away without saying good-bye—though she wasn't ever coming back, the cook said.

Our mother was so unwell that day she did not want even me in the room.

In the evening Bettina and I went into the kitchen to ask Mrs. Ransom what had become of Martha.

Mrs. Ransom was in a bad temper. She said roughly that Martha had gone under.

"Under? Under what?"

Mrs. Ransom said, "Sh!"

I went back to the kitchen alone, and begged the cook to tell me what had happened. She was angrier than ever, and said the young ladies where she lived before never asked questions, and would never have fashed themselves about a housemaid who was a horrid person.

I was angry, too, at that, and told her she was jealous of Martha. She chased me out with a hot frying-pan.

We felt justified in disbelieving all Mrs. Ransom had said when we found out that Martha had not "gone under" at all. She had gone to stay with the family of Little Klaus. But our mother said Little Klaus's wife ought not to have taken Martha in. And she wrote Mrs. Klaus a letter.

As for us, we were never to speak to Martha again. And we were not to go near Little Klaus's cottage as long as Martha stayed there. Very soon she went away.

We were reminded of Martha whenever a beggar came to the back-door, or a dusty man on the heath-road asked us for his fare to Brighton.

Martha would have told the beggar to go and wait in the first clump of gorse. And she would have smuggled food out to him. She used to borrow our threepenny-bits to make up the dusty man's fare. But she always paid us back.

I knew quite well why Mrs. Klaus had been kind to Martha. For a whole year the Klauses had been having bad luck. One of the children died. And, what seemed to be much more serious, something happened to the horse. He died, too. So the Klauses had no horse at all now, but they had four little children left. And one or other of the children was always cutting or bruising himself, or else falling ill. Martha would tell me about them. She and I would collect pieces of flannel or linen for bandages; and Martha would take mustard over to the cottage for plasters, and bread and milk for poultices. The little Klauses needed a fearful lot of poultices.

Martha was sure of my sympathy in these ministrations, because of a peculiarity of mine. When I was still quite a little girl my mother had admitted my skill in making compresses. I could take temperatures, too, and I learned how to prepare invalid foods. I found a fascinating book thrust away behind Gibbon's " Decline and Fall."

The book was called "Household Medicine." I read it a great deal—especially when one of the little Klauses had a new symptom. If I refrained from hoping my mother and sister might have more and worse maladies, that I might nurse them back to health, I would willingly have sacrificed the servants. So that the diseases that attacked the little Klauses were a godsend to me. I glanced at those unfortunates, as I passed, with the eye of the specialist. Yet often, to my shame, I could detect no sign of their sufferings.

One day I heard wailing as Betty and I went by. I told Betty to walk on slowly and wait by the Dew Pond. And I made my first visit to Mrs. Klaus. She was in bed in the tiny inner room, nursing the new baby. Mr. Klaus was sitting by the kitchen fire, with his back to the door. He had Jimmy in his arms. Jimmy had been the baby. His little face, all crumpled with crying, looked at me over his father's shoulder. He had been like this for two days.

"Just pining," they said, with the resignation of the poor. We parted upon the understanding that the thing for them to do was to give Jimmy a warm bath, and no tea or bacon for supper;

and the thing for me to do was to send him some proper food—all of which was done in collusion with Martha.

I was not a secretive person, but I had learned years before that my mother was unwilling that we should ever go into any of the cottages. Not even for shelter in a storm were we to cross one of those thresholds. I felt sure that this precaution was on Betty's account.

I never let Bettina go into the cottage. Indeed, she never wished to. That instinctive shrinking from ugliness and suffering seemed quite natural in a rose-leaf creature like Bettina. But I was made of commoner clay. And long after she had left us I missed that other piece of common clay, Martha Loring.

The thought of Martha was specially vivid in my mind on one occasion two years or more after she "went under."

Bettina caught one of her dreadful colds. But we had made her well again—so well that she insisted on going for a walk.

My mother wrapped her warmly, and I knelt down and put on her leggings and overshoes.

But, after all, we only stayed out about ten minutes. My mother said the air was raw, and "not safe."

At luncheon Bettina was urged to eat more. Though, as I say, she seemed quite well again, she had not recovered her appetite. Her normal appetite was small and fastidious. Often special dainties had to be prepared to tempt Bettina. And I remember, for a reason that will be obvious later—I remember we had delicious things to eat that day. Unluckily, Bettina wasn't hungry, and she grew rather fretful at being urged to eat more than she wanted.

My mother remembered a tonic that she sometimes made Bettina take.

When she had helped us to pudding, she went upstairs to find the tonic, because she was the only one who knew where it was. The moment she had gone, Bettina sprang up and scraped her favourite pudding into the fire. We laughed together, and recalled her evil ways as a baby. Always there had been this trouble to make Bettina eat—specially breakfast. My mother and I used to be tired out waiting while my sister, sitting in her high-chair, nibbled toast a crumb at a time, and let her bacon grow cold. So a punishment had to be invented. Bettina, who dearly loved society, must be left alone to finish breakfast—a plan that seemed to work, for when one of us went back in a few minutes, Bettina's plate would be bare. Then the awful discovery one day, in cleaning out a seldom-opened part of the side-board—a great collection of toast and bits of mouldy bacon, pushed quite to the back of the capacious drawer.

While we sat laughing over the old misdeed, feeling very grown up now and superior, a face looked in at the window—a pinched, unhappy face, with hungry eyes. A woman stood out there, holding a baby wrapped in a shawl. The window was shut, for the rain had begun as we sat down—heavy leaden drops out of a leaden sky.

I ran and opened the window. "What is it?" I said, quite unnecessarily. The woman told us she had started for the hop-fields that morning. She had no money to pay a railway fare, but a man had given her a lift as far as the village. She did not know how she was going to reach the hop-fields.

At that moment I heard my mother's voice. "What *are* you doing? Shut the window instantly!" And as I was not quick about it, she came behind me and shut the window sharply. What was I thinking of? Had I no regard for my little sister, sitting there in the current of raw air? Really, she had thought me old enough by now to be trusted!

Seldom had I been so scolded. I forgot for a moment about the woman. I remembered her only when I saw my mother make a gesture over my head. "Go away!"

"Oh, but she is tired and wet," I said, and I tried to tell her story. My mother interrupted me. Hop-pickers were a very low class. They were dirty and verminous, and spread infectious diseases.

"Go away!" she said. And again that gesture.

I felt myself choking. "She is hungry," I whispered.

My mother measured out the tonic.

My first misgiving about her shook the foundations of existence. Other, lesser instances, came back to me—strange lapses into hardness on the part of so tender a being. What did they mean? If I scratched my arm, she would fly for a soothing lotion, and help healing with soft words. If

Bettina pinched her finger, the whole house would be stirred up to sympathise. No smallest ache or ailing of ours but our mother's sensitiveness shared. And yet . . .

The woman with her burden had moved away —a draggled figure in the rain.

A horrible feeling sprang up in my heart—an impulse of actual hatred towards my mother—as the hop-picker disappeared.

Hatred of Bettina, too.

I kept thinking of the pudding in the fire. And of Martha Loring. If Martha Loring had been in the kitchen, she would somehow have got food to the woman, and a few pence. The image of Martha Loring shone bright above the greyness of that wretched time.

Looking back, I say to myself: "Not all in vain, perhaps, the life of the little servant who had been turned out of doors." At Duncombe, where she had had her time of happiness, where she had served and suffered, something of her spirit still survived.

Martha Loring sat that day in judgment on my mother. And I was torn with the misery of having to admit the sentence just.

I became critical of matters never questioned before. I fell foul of Bettina. She was selfish. She was vain. And her hair was turning pink.

It was true that the paler gold of early childhood was warming to a sort of apricot shade, infinitely lovely. But "pink hair" was accounted libellous. And, anyhow, it was a crime to tease Bettina.

Wasn't it worse, I demanded, groping among the new perceptions dawning—wasn't it worse for Bettina to tease a dumb animal?

The "worse," I was shrewd to note, was not admitted. But "Of course, Bettina must not tease the cat."

With unloving eyes I watched my mother lift an ugly black spider very gently in a handkerchief, and put the creature out to safety.

But that haggard hop-picker—no, I couldn't understand it.

The hop-picker haunted me.

Then I made a compact with her. For her sake I would contrive, somehow, to give bread to any hungry man or woman who should go by. "And so," I addressed the hop-picker in my thoughts, "though you had no bread for yourself, you will be the means of giving bread to others."

The hop-picker accepted the arrangement. Peace came back.

In the vague pagan fashion of the young I thought, too, that by kind deeds I might pay off my mother's score. Her fears for us somehow prevented her from feeling for other people's children. Something I didn't know about had made her like that.

In my struggle to resolve the discord between a nagging conscience, and my adoration for my mother, I seemed to leave childhood behind.

Still, very dimly, if at all, could I have realised there was any connection between her continued shrinking from our fellow-creatures, and that old nameless fear we used to bar the door against. Yet in one guise or another, Fear still was at the gate. Yesterday the menace of Bettina's illness. To-day a hop-picker, bringing a whiff of the sick world's infection through our windows.

To-morrow?

CHAPTER VII

A SHOCK

WHEN to-morrow came we knew.

We had been using up our capital.

Another year, at this rate, and it would be gone. What was to become of us?

Should we have to sell Duncombe House? I asked.

Only then we heard that Duncombe belonged to Lord Helmstone.

But the rent was low. My mother said "at the worst," we would go on living at Duncombe. Yes, even if we kept only one servant instead of three.

For we would still have the tiny pension granted an officer's widow.

And should we always have the pension?

Yes, as long as she lived.

Not "always" then.

* * * * *

A horrible feeling of helplessness, a sense of the bigness of the world and of our littleness, came down upon me.

We seemed to have almost no relations.

We knew our father had a step-sister, a good deal older than he. We heard that she lived in London and was childless. That was all.

My mother had been an orphan. She never seemed to want to talk about the past. When we were little we took no interest in these things. As we grew older we grew afraid of paining her with questions. In some crisis of house-cleaning a photograph came to the surface. Who was this with the hair rolled high and the pear-shaped earrings? Oh, that was Mrs. Harborough.

"Aunt Josephine?"

"Well, your father's step-sister."

All hope of better acquaintance with her was dashed by learning that she had opposed our father's marriage, opposed it bitterly.

"She couldn't have known you," Bettina said.

"That I was not known to her was crime enough," my mother answered with unwonted bitterness.

Just as we were made to feel that questions about Aunt Josephine were troubling, I felt now that to inquire into our precise financial condition was to harass and depress my mother. The condition was bad. Therefore it was best covered up.

"We shall manage," she said.

I was sixteen when this thunder-bolt descended, and, by that time, I knew that "to manage" was just what my mother, at all events, was quite incapable of doing. We still kept three servants and no accounts. Lawyers' letters were put away. Out of sight, they seemed to be out of mind. Out of my mother's mind.

I thought constantly about these things.

One day, months later, I blurted out a hope that we should all die together. My mother was horrified.

"But if we don't," I said, "how are we going to live—Bettina and I, without the pension?"

"You will have husbands, I hope, to take care of you."

I went over the grounds for this "hope" with no great confidence.

My mother went alone into the garden.

She came in looking tired and white.

Compunction seized me. I persuaded her to go and lie down. I would bring up her tea-tray. I expected to have to beg and urge. But she went upstairs "quite goodly," as we used to say. She looked back and smiled. She was still the most beautiful person we knew. But it was a very waxen beauty now. I must learn not to weary her with insoluble riddles. I went into the dining-room to make her tray ready—I liked doing it myself. Bettina's voice came floating in. She had grown tired of playing proper music. She was singing the nursery rhyme which my mother had set to variations of the tinkling old-world tune:

"Where are you going to, my pretty maid?"

I thought how strange and wonderful was the simplest, most ordinary little life. There must always be that question: what is going to become of me? I had long known what was the proper thing to happen. I ought to marry Lord Helmstone's heir. And Bettina should marry a prince.

But Lord Helmstone's heir turned out to be a middle-aged cousin with a family. Lord Helmstone himself had only lately taken to coming to Forest Hall—since the laying out of the golf-course. Still less frequently came my lady. Very smart, with amazing clothes; and some married daughters with babies. There were two daughters unmarried, who seemed to be always abroad or in London. We liked Lord Helmstone; even my mother liked him But she criticised his "noisy friends." These were the golfers who motored down from London. Broad-shouldered men, in tweeds that made them seem broader still. They would pass by our garden-wall and look at Bettina. Often when they had passed they looked back. Secretly, I wondered if any of them were those "husbands" who were going to take care of us. Some lodged in the village. The noisiest stayed at the Hall.

Bettina's singing had broken off abruptly. I heard her running upstairs.

And then a cry.

"Come—oh, quickly, *quickly!*"

Bettina had heard the fall overhead.

Our mother lay on the floor, Bettina standing over her, agonised, helpless.

We lifted her on to the bed. We loosened her clothing, and brought water, and bathed her temples.

She opened her eyes and smiled—then the lids went down. Still that look, the look that made her a stranger.

Was this death? . . .

Bettina shrank from it. But I told her not to leave the room a second. I would bring the doctor quickly.

Bettina's face. . . . "I cannot stay alone," she whispered.

"I will send up one of the servants."

She held my arm. "Suppose . . . while you are gone—— Oh, I am afraid."

"I will run all the way," I said.

CHAPTER VIII

ANNAN

I COULD not speak when I reached the village. They gave me water.

I had in any case to wait a moment till the postmaster was free, for I could not use the telephone myself. My mother had a horror of our touching the public one. She had spoken with disgust of the mouthpiece that everybody breathed into. "Full of germs!" Then it must be bad for other people, we said. "Other people must take their chance." I remembered that as I leaned against the counter, panting, while the postmaster wrote out a telegram. *We* were "taking the chance" now. Such a little thing—my not knowing how to telephone. Yet it might cost my mother her life.

The postmaster rang up Brighton.

The doctor was out.

What could be done but leave a message!

I would go to the Helmstones and ask for a motor-car. Why had I not thought of that before?

Then the postmaster said that the Helmstones had all left for London that morning. He had seen them go by. Two motors full. He recommended the doctor at Littlecombe. If I waited a while, the baker's cart would come back from its rounds, and I could send, or go myself with the driver to Littlecombe.

"Wait"? There was that at Duncombe that would not wait. For me, too, waiting was the one impossible thing. I cast about in my distracted mind.

That new acquaintance of the Helmstone's! Was he not a sort of a doctor? "The scientific chap," as his lordship called the man who had taken rooms at Big Klaus's farm. Lord Helmstone had complained of his Scotch arrogance—"frankly astonished if a Southron makes a decent drive." We had not seen him—at least, not to distinguish an arrogant Scot from other golfers.

I ran most of the way to the farm.

As I stood waiting for the door to open, a man came up the path with golf clubs. Tallish. In careless clothes, otherwise of a very un-careless aspect. In those seconds of watching the figure come up the pathway with a sort of rigidity of gait, I received an impression of something so restrained and chilling that I hoped he was not the man I had come for. In any case this was not a person before whom one would care to show emotion. I asked if he were Mr. Annan. Yes, his name was Annan. His tone asked: and what business was it of mine? But he halted there, below me, as I stood on the step explaining very briefly my errand.

He did not want to come; I could see that.

He made some excuse about not being a general practitioner.

I was sorry I had spoken in that self-possessed way. I saw I had given him no idea of the urgency of our need. I had to explain that all we asked of him was to give some help at once. And only for once. Our regular doctor would be with us very soon.

He seemed slow-witted, for he stood there several seconds, with one free hand pulling at his rough moustache of reddish-brown.

" We mustn't lose time," I said.

As I led the way, I heard the door open behind me, and the sound of golf clubs thrown down in a stone passage.

He caught up with me at the gate, and we walked rapidly across Big Klaus's fields. While we were going by the pond, in the lower meadow, a moorhen scuttled to her nest in the tangle on the bank. Her creaking cry had always sounded so cheerful since my mother pointed out that the mechanic "click! click!" was like a Christmas toy. To-day I knew it for a warning.

The man had caught up a stick. He struck sharply with it, as he passed, at the tall nettles growing in the ditch.

What was happening at home all this time? I began to walk faster, with a great misery at my heart. What was the good of this man who wasn't a general practitioner? He was too like all the other broad-shouldered young golfers in Norfolk jackets—far too like them, to help in so dire a need as ours.

I tried to hearten myself by recalling what Lord Helmstone had said of him. That "the bigwigs in the world of science spoke of Annan with enthusiasm." "An original mind." "A demon for work" (that was, perhaps, why he hadn't wanted to come with me). Odds and ends came back. "Annan would go far." He had gone too far in the direction of overwork. He had been urged to come down here and play golf. Still, he worked long hours. . . .

And while I recalled these things, in the back of my head, I kept repeating: " Mother, mother! I am bringing help."

We did not talk, except for my turning suddenly to warn him that my younger sister was not to know if my mother——

" Yes, yes! " he said. I felt he understood. I walked faster—almost at a run. He did not seem to notice. His long strides kept him near me without an effort.

Mother, mother!——

Oh, how wildly the birds were singing! She had said that only we ever noticed the special quality in the vesper song. Something the morning never heard. The air was filled with a passion of that belated singing. " Good-night," I heard her say, " is better than good-morning."

Oh, mother! if that is so for you, think of your children.

Did the stranger object to jumping ditches and climbing stiles?

" I am taking you the short cut," I said.

"Of course."

We were coming to the copse on the edge of the heath. The hawthorn foamed along the outer fringe. This was where we met Colonel Dover all those years ago. Every inch of the way I saw pictures of my mother. All that gentleness and beauty——

What a richness had been lavished on our lives!

I had never begun to understand it before this evening—never once had thanked her.

Mother, mother!——

The copse was full of her. Her figure went before me between the bare larch boles, taking care not to tread on flowers. The ground was a sheet of blue when we had last come here. The time of wild hyacinths was nearly over now. And her time—— Was that nearly over too? Where would she be when the foxgloves stood tall here among the bracken? The larch stems wavered and the hazels shivered. The man was on in front now, the first to cross the outermost stile. As I hurried after him, he looked back. I did not know until I met his eyes that mine were wet . . . and that I was walking not quite steadily. I had run a long way that evening.

" Rest a moment," he said; and he looked away from me and up at the flowering may. " The scent is very heavy," he said. " I knew a woman once who was always made faint by it."

He did not look at me again.

But I had seen that those hard eyes could look kind.

* * * * *

Now we could see the red tile roof.

Underneath it what was happening? I had been long gone, for all my running.

As we came across the links, the sun went down behind the wall of Duncombe garden.

Oh, sun! I prayed, do not go down for ever.

* * * * *

Before I entered the house a strange thing happened.

A great peace fell on me.

I knew, without asking, that all was well.

Was that a blackcap singing? And had I seen the sun go down? What magic light was this, then, that was shining on the world?

* * * * *

He saw my mother, and told us what to do.

Bettina stayed with her, while I came down with Mr. Annan to hear his verdict.

As we stood in the lower hall, I looked up to find his eyes on me—eyes suddenly so gentle that terror fell on me afresh.

"You don't think she is going to die?"

"Good nursing," he said, "will make a difference. One must always hope——"

"Oh, you must save us!" I said incoherently; and then corrected: "My mother! . . ."

He seemed to accept the charge. He would come back early in the morning.

* * * * *

I never found the bridge between that passion of dread about my mother's life—and the strange new passion that took possession of me, body and soul.

Like the dart of a kingfisher out of the shade of a thicket into intensest sunshine, the new thing flashed across my life, all emerald and red-gold and azure—a blinding iridescence, and a quickness that was like the quickness of God.

CHAPTER IX

ERIC

For a long time I said nothing in his presence, except in answer to some direction.

There seemed no need to talk.

Enough for me to see him come striding across the links; to watch him walk into my mother's room; to see a certain look come into his eyes. It came so seldom that sometimes I told myself I must have dreamed it.

Then it would come again.

He made my mother almost well. But when he went back to London he left a great misery behind him.

No one knew, and I hoped that in time I should get over it. At least I pretended that was what I hoped. I would rather have had that pain of longing than all the pleasure any other soul could give.

* * * * *

The following year my mother was wonderfully well, and so cheerful I hadn't the heart to worry her with questions.

We saw more of the Helmstones than ever before. My mother even went to them once or twice. A few days before that first visit of Eric Annan's had ended, Lady Helmstone and the two unmarried daughters came home from touring round the world in their cousin's yacht. Lady Barbara was the plain daughter. She was twenty-two and wrote poetry, we heard. But we thought the youngest of the family much the cleverest. Hermione was striking to look at, and the fact that she laughed at Barbara, and at pretty well everyone else, made her seem very superior. Also, she had an air.

She made a deep impression on Bettina. I, too, found her wonderful. But my mother said she was crude. We thought that was only because, in spite of "being who she was," Hermione Helmstone put pink stuff on her lips and darkened the under lid of her green eyes. Just a little, you understand. Enough to give her a look of extraordinary brilliancy. She took a great fancy to Bettina. In spite of Bettina's being so young Hermione used to tell her about her love affairs.

There seemed to be a great many. But one was serious. She was as good as engaged, she said, to Guy Whitby-Dawson. He was in the Guards.

We were all agog. When was she going to be married?

She didn't know. It was dreadfully expensive being in the Guards.

Being a peer seemed to be very expensive, too. Hermione's father had so many places to keep up, and so many daughters, he couldn't afford to give Hermione more than "the merest pittance." When we heard what it was, we thought it very grand to call such a provision a mere pittance.

I wished we three had a pittance.

For those two to try to live on it would be madness, Hermione said. So she and Guy would have to wait. Perhaps some of Guy's relations would die. Then he would have plenty.

Meanwhile, in spite of being as good as engaged, Hermione flirted a good deal with her cousin, Eddie Monmouth, and with the various other young men who came to the week-end parties and for the hunting. Bettina and I were often rather sorry for Guy, until the day when Hermione brought over some of his photographs for us to look at. We did not admire him at all.

But we never told Hermione.

As for me, though I tried to take an interest, I was never really thinking about any of the things that were going on about me. And I was always thinking of the same thing. Day and night, the same thing.

If my mother sent me into the garden to see whether the autumn crocuses were up—all I could see was his face. It came up everywhere I looked. I grew impatient of the companionship I had most loved. I was thankful when Hermione had carried off my sister for the afternoon. I felt Lord Helmstone had done me a personal kindness when he dropped in, on the way to or from the golf links, to talk to my mother. I would slip away just for ten minutes to think about " him " in peace. When I went in I would find I had been gone for hours.

The old laws of Time and Space seemed all at sixes and sevens. The old devotions paled.

Mercifully, nobody knew.

* * * * *

I looked for him all the next spring. In the summer I said to myself, I shall never see him again.

Then a day in September when he came. Came not only to Big Klaus's and the Links. He came to Duncombe the very first evening, to ask about my mother.

I heard his voice at the door. It seemed to come up from the roots of the world to knock against my heart. I stood by the banisters out of sight and listened, while I held the banisters hard.

No, he wouldn't come in now. He would come to-morrow.

I flew to the window in the morning-room, and looked out.

I had not dreamed him. He was true.

* * * * *

The next day brought him.

I had all those hours to get myself in hand. I was quite quiet. The others seemed gladder to see him than I.

He was pleased at finding my mother so well. The crowning proof of her being stronger was her doing a quite unprecedented thing. She invited Mr. Annan to come and have tea at Duncombe, instead of tramping all that distance back to the Farm. Big Klaus's tea she was sure was worse even than the Club House brew.

The result was that he fell into the habit of playing another round after tea, which my mother said was good for him. She agreed with Lord Helmstone that Mr. Annan should not work when he had come away for a holiday. The Helmstones were for ever asking him to lunch and dine. But he always said "that sort of thing" took up too much time. So we felt flattered when, instead of playing the other round, he would sit there in the garden, after tea, smoking a pipe and talking to us.

Bettina said our home-made cakes and delicious Duncombe tea were quite wasted on him. I was secretly indignant at the charge. But Bettina made him confess he could not tell Indian from China.

"Very well then," I said, "it proves he doesn't come only for tea," and upon that a fire seemed to play all round my body, scorching me. But no one noticed.

It was wonderful to see him again—to verify all those things I had been thinking about him for the year and four months since he went away.

But if I were told, even now, to describe Eric Annan, I would say at once that he was a person whose special quality escaped from any net of words that sought to catch it. If, at the time I speak of, I had been compelled to make the attempt, I should have taken refuge in such commonplaces as: strongly-built; colouring, between dark and fair; a wholesome kind of mouth, with good teeth; brown eyes, not large, with reddish flecks in the iris. And I might have added one thing more uncommon. That gift of his for saying nothing at all without embarrassment.

I thought of him as a person standing alone. I could not imagine him in the usual relationships. The others must have felt like that about him, too, for I remember they were surprised when Lord Helmstone told us that Eric Annan was one of the large family of an impoverished Scots laird. Bettina said to him the next day: "I don't suppose you have any sisters."

He looked surprised, and I expected him to repudiate such trifles. But he said: "Yes. Three," in a tone that dismissed them.

But the confession seemed to have brought him nearer, to make him more human. He had been a little boy, then, playing with little girls. He had grown up, not only with students and professors, but with sisters. Oh, happy sisters! how they must adore him! I asked him to tell us about them: were the sisters like him? No. What were they like?

"Oh——" he looked vague. Then he presented a testimonial. They were "all right."

The proof: two of them were married. And the third? Oh, the third was only twenty. I felt a special interest in that one. But all we could learn was that she was engaged. So she was probably "all right," too.

My mother was the best at making him talk. She discovered that he was "like so many of the silent-seeming people," fluent enough when he liked. Though he never was fluent about his sisters, when he came to know us better, he told my mother about his elder brother, struggling still to keep up the property—a losing battle. And a second brother, not very clever, intended for the navy. He hadn't got on. He left the navy and had some small post in the Customs. The third brother was "trying to grow tea in Ceylon."

Bettina hoped the third brother was more intelligent about tea than our friend. Eric was the fourth son. To get a scientific education, on any terms, had been a struggle. He had to arrive at it obliquely, by way of studying medicine. Pure science didn't pay. But science was the one thing on earth worth a man's giving his life to.

I see him sitting in the level light on Duncombe lawn, looking up in that sudden way of his, and narrowing his eyes at the sunset, bringing out the word *research* with a tenacity of insistence on the "r" which must make even a Natural Law feel the hopelessness of hiding any longer.

That preliminary to setting aside his earlier reserve—a forefinger sweeping upward and outward through the red-brown thatch on his upper lip—and then telling my mother about those hours of fathoms-deep absorption; of the ray of light that, from time to time, would pierce the darkness. He told her, with something very like emotion, of the great, still gladness that came out of conquest of the smallest corner of the Hidden Field—that vast Hinterland as yet untrodden.

CHAPTER X

THE BUNGALOW

My mother said this was the New Consecration. He is the stuff of the *dévot,* she said. In another age he would have been a great ascetic, or a saint.

I was thankful the temptations, in these directions, were slight for people of our time. I liked better to think of him in one of his boyish moods, helping us to re-stock our aquarium.

Hermione Helmstone's inclination to mock behind his back, to imitate little stiffnesses and what she called his "Scotticisms," even Lady Barbara's unblushing *Schwärmerei,* was less a trial to me than the talk about saints and ascetics.

The Helmstone girls fell into the bad habit of dropping in to share our tea and our visitor.

Hermione pretended that she came solely to keep Barbara in countenance.

But Hermione on these occasions did most of the talking.

She didn't care what she said. "How long," she demanded, "are you going to stay?"—a heart-thumping question which none of us had ventured to put.

"Three weeks."

"A beggarly little while," she said, exchanging looks with her confederate. Then her malicious sympathy at his having to spend so much of his life in sick rooms and hospitals, "looking at horrors."

He said, somewhat shortly, that he spent most of his life nowadays—thank God!—in a laboratory.

Which was scarcely polite.

"Ouf!" Hermione sniffed, "I know! Place full of bottles and bad smells."

He smiled at that, and took it up with spirit.

"No room in your house so clean," he said. "And no place anywhere half so interesting." A laboratory was full of mystery; yes, and of romance—oh, naturally, not *her* kind.

What did he know about "her kind"? Hermione demanded.

Perhaps he knew more than we suspected. For, just as though he guessed that Hermione's name for him was "Scotch Granite," and that she lamented Barbara's always falling in love with such unromantic people, he scoffed at Hermione's conception of romance. "An ideal worthy of the servants' hall. A marble terrace by moonlight. . . . No? Well, then, the supper-room at the Carlton—Paris frocks, diamonds, a band banging away; and a thousand-pound motor-car waiting to whirl the happy pair away to bliss of the most expensive brand."

They went on to quarrel about novels. Hermione hated the gloomy kind. For Eric's benefit she added, "And the scientific kind."

"Exactly!" It was for her sort of "taste" that ample provision was made in the feuilleton of a certain paper.

Hermione was not a bit dashed. "*You* may look for romance in bottles if you like. For my part . . ." she stuck out her chin.

"Well, oblige the company by telling us what you look for in a story?"

"Orange blossoms," says she promptly; "not little bits of brain."

He laughed with the rest of us at that, and he knocked the ash out of his pipe against the arm of the garden chair. Lord Helmstone, he said, would be waiting for his foursome.

* * * * *

A day or two after, Hermione accused him to his face of "story-telling."

"You said you were only going to stay three weeks."

To our astonishment he answered: "I don't think I said 'only' three weeks. I said three weeks. Three weeks certainly."

"——and all the while arranging to settle down and live here."

I looked from Eric, slightly annoyed, to Hermione, mocking, and to Lady Barbara, rolling large pale eyes and smiling self-consciously.

"What makes you think I'm going to settle down?" he demanded.

"Well, isn't that the intention of most people who put up a cottage in the country?"

"Oh! you mean my penny bungalow." He picked up his golf clubs. "Nobody in this country 'settles down' in a bungalow," he said.

As though she had some private understanding of the matter, Lady Barbara seemed to speak for him. "——just to live in for a while," she said quite gently.

"Not to live in at all." Eric threw the strap of the canvas golf-bag over his shoulder, and made for the front-door.

"What do you want a bungalow *for,* then?"

Hermione's teasing voice followed after him.

"——mere harmless eccentricity." He was "like that," he said. He turned round at Hermione's laugh, and I saw him looking at the expression on Lady Barbara's face. Very gentle and happy; almost pretty. And I had never thought Lady Barbara the least pretty before.

Eric, too, seemed to be struck. "I find I've got to have a place to put things," he said more seriously, and then he went on out. "Must have some place to keep one's traps," he called back.

Lady Barbara stood leaning against the door and looking out at the retreating figure, still with that expression that made the plain face almost beautiful.

I felt that Eric had come lamely out of the encounter. What did it all mean? For he had said nothing whatever to us (who thought ourselves his special friends) about this curious project of putting up a bungalow.

* * * * *

A hideous little ready-made house, with a roof of corrugated iron, painted arsenic green, it came down from London in sections, and was set up in a field adjoining Big Klaus's orchard.

The field belonged to Lord Helmstone.

Eric continued to eat and to sleep at Big Klaus's, but he used to go over to the Bungalow and shut himself up to work.

As the days went on, and he showed no sign of increased intimacy with the Helmstones I clutched at the idea that perhaps he had found he couldn't work very well in the midst of farmyard noises. He had spoken of the melancholy moo-ing of cows waiting for meadow-bars to be let down; of the baa-ing and grunting and the eternal barking that went on. And those noises—which he was, strangely, still more sensitive to—produced by Big Klaus's cocks and hens underneath Eric's window; and by the ducks and geese hissing and clacking on the pond between the house and the stables. I was not likely to forget how he had mocked at "country quiet" or the samples he gave us of the academic calm that reigned at Big Klaus's. I think I never heard my mother laugh so much as on that first day he "did" the peaceful country life for us—Eric rather out of temper, presenting his grievance with great spirit:

"——wretched man sits up addling his brains till two in the morning. At four, this kind of thing——" In a quiet, meditative way he would begin clucking. Then quacking, almost sleepily at first; then with more and more fervour till he would leave the ducks and soar away on the ecstasy of a loud, exuberant crow. All this not the least in the sketchy, impressionist way that most people who try will imitate those humble noises, but with a precision and vigour that first startled you, and then made you feel that you were being given, not only an absolutely faithful reproduction of the sound those creatures make, but in the oddest way given their point of view as well. We laughed the more, I think, because the comedy seemed to come out of the revelation of the immense seriousness of the animals. Eric's commentary seemed so fair. It seemed to admit that the importance to ducks and cocks and hens of *their* goings on was at least as great as the importance of peace and quiet to him. With an air of doing it against the grain, he gave you (with a rueful kind of honesty) the duck's sentiments in a series of depressed little quacks that hardly needed the translation: "'Been all over this repulsive pond; turned myself and all my family upside down for hours. Nothing!'" Then indignant quacks, and: "'Silly new servant can't tell time. Past five o'clock, and no sharps!'" Then a single jubilant "'Quack! There she is——'" and a rising chorus, till anyone not in the room would be ready to swear we kept as many ducks as Big Klaus. A moment's silence, and in his own person Eric would say with a sigh: "*Now,* perhaps, I can tackle that German review." "'Buck! Buck! Buck!'"—or rather a series of sounds that defies the alphabet. Then the interruption: "'My-wife's-laid-an-egg!'" and the shrill rapture of a loud crow of great authority.

The Bungalow was out of earshot of all that. We heard orders were given that no letters or telegrams were ever to be taken to the Bungalow. When Eric was there, "no matter what happened," nobody was to disturb him.

And when he wasn't there the Bungalow was shut and locked.

I think I have said that Hermione was the most daring girl imaginable.

She went one day ("Well, doesn't the field belong to us?") and looked in at first one window and then another. She said there was nothing but a stove and packing-cases in the room she could see into. And she brought back a bewildering account of what had been done to the windows of the other room. There were no curtains and no blinds, but thick brown paper had been pasted over the glass of each lower sash. You could no more see in than you could see through the wall. The top sashes were down, and Hermione naturally thought he must be there. So she called "Mr. Annan!" quite loud. But he wasn't there after all, she said.

Of course, the next time she met him on the links she began to tease him about papering up his windows. "And how can you see?"

"Oh, quite well, thank you."

"Well, anyhow, I don't believe you read all the time. Nobody could read the whole day and half the night."

No, he didn't read all the time.

"What do you do then?"

Ah, there was no telling.

And that was true. There was no getting Eric to tell you anything he didn't want to.

Hermione announced that she had been to call.

"Yes," he said, "I heard you call."

She stared.

"You don't mean to say you were in there all the time?"

"Yes, I was there," he said, going on with his putting practice quite at his ease.

Hermione was speechless for a moment, and that was the only time in my life I ever saw Hermione blush.

"What a monster you were not to come out when you heard me!"

"Sorry, but I was too busy," he said. "I always *am* busy when I'm at the Bungalow."

She was still rather red, but laughing, too. "I suppose, then, you heard me try the door?" (She hadn't told us she had gone as far as that.)

"Yes, I heard you try the door."

"Well, you *are* an extraordinary being—shutting yourself up with brown paper pasted over the windows——"

"——only the lower half, and none at all over the skylight."

"Sitting there behind brown paper, with the door locked!"

He laughed. "You see how necessary my precautions are."

"I believe you do something in there you're ashamed of."

"Well, I'm not very proud of what I do. Not yet."

She clutched Barbara's arm. "Babs," she said in a loud whisper, "he makes bombs."

"Sh! not so loud, please." Eric looked solemnly across the links to where Eddie Monmouth was giving Bettina her first lesson in hitting off.

"No, it isn't bombs," Hermione said, after a moment. "You make counterfeit money."

"If ever I make any money," Eric agreed, "it will have to be counterfeit."

* * * * *

One day, with Lady Barbara following anxious in her wake, Hermione came flying in to tell us she was hot on the trace of Eric Annan's secret. He was one of those horrible vivisectionists! The Bungalow was a torture chamber. She had gone to the station to meet someone, and there on the platform, addressed "E. Annan, Esq.," was a crate full of creatures—poor little darling guinea-pigs.

She taxed him with the guinea-pigs the moment he appeared.

" No wonder you paste thick brown paper over your windows. What do you do with all those poor darling guinea-pigs? "

He answered by asking her what she did with all her Chow dogs. I think he probably knew that Hermione bred these dogs. They took prizes at shows, and Hermione did a thriving trade in selling Chows to her friends, for sums that seemed to us extortionate. She bought jewellery with some of the proceeds, the rest she put in the bank.

But there was truth as well as evasion in the answer she gave Eric: " You know perfectly well the Chows are pets."

" Exactly; and what a wasted youth yours must have been if you never heard of keeping guinea-pigs."

" ' Keeping them '—I used to have them to play with; but you know quite well you don't mean to ' keep ' them."

" Not for ever. Very clever of you if you kept yours for ever."

Of course she hadn't been able to keep them beyond their natural span. "But I never did anything horrible to them."

Then Lady Barbara, whose long upper lip seemed to have grown longer under the tension, behaved a little treacherously to her sister. In her anxiety to excuse whatever Eric might do, or have done, Barbara told, in her halting way, some family anecdotes about Hermione's teasing pets that had to be rescued from her clutches, and about certain birds and kittens, and a monkey, which had one and all succumbed.

Hermione tried to make light of these damaging revelations. "I was only a child."

But Lady Barbara gave her no quarter. It was only a year ago, Babs said, that Hermione had a horse killed under her in Scotland. "You were warned, too. You just rode him to death. And you know nobody gives the dogs such whippings as you do."

Hermione ignored the horse. To do her justice she hated to be reminded of that. But she defended whipping the dogs. If they weren't whipped now and then, they'd get out of hand.

"Why should they be 'in hand'?" Eric asked. "For *your* pleasure. And profit. Not theirs." He spoke of the severity of training that broke in house-dogs, and I had my first glimpse of the difficulty of that point in ethics, the relation of human beings to domestic animals. Hermione was goaded into harking back to the guinea-pigs. Where was he going to keep them?

In hutches, or in enclosures in the field.

Hermione's eyes sparkled. She was glad she had counted them, she said. "I shall just notice how long you keep them."

"Oh, when I've trained them, of course I shall dispose of them."

Hermione looked at him a moment, and then with her most beguiling air, she begged him not to tease her any more. "What do you really want them for?"

"Well," he said, "I'll tell you. I am trying an experiment. I expect, after all, to make my fortune."

Lady Barbara brightened at that. Eric went on briskly: "You know how fast guinea-pigs breed, and how close and clean they crop grass. Well, here is a great natural industry waiting to be exploited. My guinea-pigs are going to give an ocular demonstration to my farmer friends. My idea is, if I breed guinea-pigs and let them out in squads at so much a day——"

"But if you let them out," said Lady Barbara, innocently, "won't they run away? Ours did."

While Hermione was laughing, Eric promised to supply movable enclosures with his Guinea-Pig Squads. "When they've eaten one area clean, simply move the hurdles on. You'll see. There'll soon be a corner in guinea-pigs and a slump in lawn-mowers."

CHAPTER XI

AWAKENING

THERE was another flutter of excitement when Eric had his Chief Assistant down from London. At last, somebody else was allowed to go into the Bungalow.

This extension of hospitality did not make the Bungalow seem more accessible, but distinctly less so. For the Chief Assistant lived altogether in the Bungalow; and he must have liked living there, for he never wanted to take walks, or do anything but just stay in the Bungalow. He cooked his own meals and washed his own dishes. His speech was like the rest of him, and the most forthcoming thing he ever said, according to Mrs. Klaus, was " Good-morning." So not even Hermione could pump the Invaluable Bootle, as Eric called him. Hermione called him the Beetle, because he was a round-shouldered, brown young man, with goggle eyes and very long arms and legs.

Eric defended his Assistant. Hermione once made the slip of saying of Mr. Bootle that he looked like the kind of person she could quite imagine taking a pleasure in doing innocent animals to death.

" I shouldn't have said Bootle was the least like you," Eric said, with a deadly suavity. She saw he had not forgotten Babs' stories, but he seemed very willing not to pursue the subject.

" Everything comes to an end sometime. Even you, Lady Hermione—not to speak of the rest of us. And some of us would be content enough to know our way of dying had left the world a little more enlightened than we found it."

* * * * *

I minded none of Hermione's audacities so much as her speaking of Eric as " Babs' property." " Poor old Babs," she said behind her sister's back—the best the Ugly Duckling of the family could hope for was a parson, or some professor-person.

We noticed the professor-person never stayed long if the Helmstones came.

That pleased me more than anything.

He was quite different when he was alone with us three. He was patient, and took some pains, I think, to make us understand that feeling of his about Scientific Research. He seemed to give us the key of the wonderful laboratory in London, where he " spent the greater part " of his life. I, too, came to feel it must be the most fascinating place in the world.

Not a place where men dealt only with dead matter, but where they " proved the spirit."

A friend of his had discovered things about X rays; a knowledge, Eric said, which had saved other men from death; and from what he thought was worse—long, hopeless suffering. His friend knew that he was running a risk with the X rays. He saw that the sores on his hands grew worse; they were eating in. A thumb and forefinger had to go, then the entire hand; presently, the other hand. His eyes—— Then he died.

Eric didn't seem sorry, though his voice changed and he looked away. " It was a fine way to die."

He said the self-discipline imposed by the pursuit of science had become the chief hope of the world. All the good that was in Militarism had been got out of it. It was a spent shell now, half-buried in the long grass of a fallow field. Still, it was no wonder the majority of the governing class, out of touch with the real work of the world—no wonder they still groped after the military idea.

They saw the idle on the one hand and the overworked on the other, wallowing in a sickly wash of sentiment; they saw the dry rot in Government. He himself had small patience with politicians, or with those other "preachers"—in the pulpits. In old days, when the churches were in touch with the people, a man might feed his flock instead of merely living off the sheep of his pasture.

But the people who fared worst at Eric's hands were the professional politicians. They were "bedevilled" by the most intellect-deadening of all the opiates, the Soothing Syrup of Popularity. They must be excused from doing anything else because, forsooth, they did such a lot of talking.

We discovered an unexpected vein of humour in him the day he travestied a certain distinguished friend of Lord Helmstone's. We were shown the Great Man on the hustings at a Scottish election, and we laughed afresh over Eric's fury at his own evocation. As though the distinguished personage were actually there, perorating on Duncombe lawn, Eric brushed up his moustache and began to heckle him. What had he *done*—except to use his great position as a rostrum? What had been done by all the members of the Lords and Commons put together comparable to the achievements of—for instance, Sanitary Science? Ha, *Science!* No phrase-making. No flourish of fine feelings. Just Sanitation—the force that had done more in fifty years to improve the condition of the poor than all the philanthropy since the birth of Christ. And what had the Government done even for Science?

Then the Personage, magnificently superior, setting forth the folly, the sinful waste of getting him there, and not listening to his words of wisdom.

" When I ope my mouth let no dog bark."

No such ineptitudes from your man of science. The conditions of his work—humbleness of spirit, a patient tracking down of fact—these kept him sane; kept him oriented. Woe to him if he fell into fustian, or pretended to a wisdom he could not substantiate. Your man of science had to mind his eye and test his findings. He worked without applause, away from the limelight. He was unwritten about—unknown. Even when, after years of toil, your man of science came out of obscurity with some great gift for the world in his hand, no one except other men of science was the least excited. The *Daily Mail* was quite unmoved. The service done mankind by science left the general public in the state of Pet Majorie's turkey:

"——she was more than usual calm,
She did not give a single damn."

He was not complaining.

All this was wholesome.

"Science!"

"No high-piled monuments are theirs who chose
Her great inglorious toil—no flaming death.
To them was sweet the poetry of prose,
And wisdom gave a fragrance to their breath.

"Who wrote that?" my mother asked.

With a thrill in his voice: "A friend of mine!" Eric said, "A friend of the human race."

And he told us about him.

I asked to have the verse written down.

Life seemed a splendid thing as he talked; but still, a splendour only to dazzle me—not to light and lead.

When he was there, all I asked was to sit and listen, and now and then to steal a look.

When he had gone, all I wanted was to be left alone, that I might go over all he had said, all he had looked, and endlessly embroider upon that background.

My best times, in his absence, were those safest from interruption—the long, blessed hours while other people slept.

To lie in bed conjuring up pictures of Eric, conversations with Eric, had come to be my idea not only of happiness but of luxury. And, as seems the way of all indulgence taken in secret and without restraint, this of mine enervated me, made me less fit for the society of my fellow-beings. I found myself irked by the things that before had pleased me, impatient even of people I loved. I was like the secret drinker, ready to sacrifice anything to gratify my hidden craving.

* * * * *

All this time Bettina was less in my thoughts than she had been since she was born—till that afternoon when I began to think furiously about her again.

Lord Helmstone had come with Eddie Monmouth and carried Eric off. I thought they had all three gone to the links.

I went indoors and wrote a note for my mother. Then I escaped to the garden. I will go down in the orchard, I said to myself, and wait by the gap for a glimpse of Eric playing the short round. Along the south wall I went towards the landmark of the big apple-tree, a yard or so this side of the gap. As I passed the ripening wall-fruit, netted to protect it from the birds, I remembered my mother had said the formal espaliers wore the air of a jealously-guarded beauty smiling behind her veil. The old tree by the gap was like some peasant "Mother of Many," she said, rude and generous, bearing on her gnarled arms a bushel to one of the more delicate fruits on the wall.

All the way down to the end of the orchard I had glimpses through the lesser trees of old "Mother of Many," brave and smiling, holding out clusters of red-cheeked apples to the last rays of the sun. I started, and stood as still as the apple-tree.

Under the low branches two figures. My sister's raised face. The other bending down. He kissed her—Eddie Monmouth.

I turned and fled back to the house.

The kiss might have been on my lips, so effectually it wakened me out of my dreaming.

Bettina!—old enough to be kissed by a man!

So she was the first to be engaged . . . my little sister, who had only just had her sixteenth birthday.

* * * * *

I tried that night to lead up to a confidence.

But I had neglected Bettina too long, apparently, for her to want to tell me her great secret just at first.

So I waited.

Then a dreadful day when Hermione came over to say that she was going up to London for Eddie Monmouth's wedding.

Yes, most unexpected. All in hot haste, just before his sailing for India. The bride a girl they had never heard of.

I dared not look at Betty for some minutes. When at last I mustered up courage to steal a glance—not a cloud on Betty's face.

Here was courage!

But what the poor child must be going through. —I could not leave her to bear this awful thing alone. . . .

When Hermione had gone I told Bettina that I knew.

She looked at me out of her innocent eyes, and reddened just a little. Then she laughed: "Oh, I don't mind *like that!*" she said. "He was very nice. But I think I prefer Ranny Dallas."

At first I was sure this was just a brave attempt to bear her suffering alone.

But I was wrong.

Bettina *did* like Ranny Dallas best!

He liked Bettina, and flirted with her.

I began to see that I had not been looking after Bettina properly.

* * * * *

But I saw more than that.

I saw that I, too, had been drifting. I had no idea where any of us were. Where was my mother in her lonely struggle? Where was Bettina, in her ignorance, straying? I, myself? I had been content with dreaming. Or with waking now and then to thrill at stories about other people's courage, insight, indomitable patience. Why should *I* not rouse myself and nerve myself? Why should not I, too, scorn delight and live-laborious days?

It was then the Great Idea came to me.

CHAPTER XII

OUR FIRST BALL

ERIC stayed nearly eight weeks instead of three. Yet I let him go away without a word about the radical change that had come over a life outwardly the same.

* * * * *

That was the year I was eighteen. But I still did lessons with my mother—French and German, and English history. I asked her to let me leave off history, and allow me to work by myself a little. I wanted to surprise her, by-and-by, so she was not to question me.

I studied a great deal harder than she knew. When we sat down to breakfast at half-past eight I would usually have three hours of work behind me. Often when Bettina and I were both supposed to be at the Helmstones, I had stayed behind in the copse "to read." This would be when I knew Ranny Dallas was not at the Hall.

I still thought that, like all the other young men who came there, he was attracted by Hermione. But I could not forget that Bettina "liked him best"—liked him more than the man she had allowed to kiss her, and who had not cared for her at all.

I did my best to make Betty see that even if a man as young as Ranny Dallas were to think of marrying at present, it would be the Hermione sort of person he would think of. For we knew that since his elder brother's death a great deal was expected of Ranny.

All that I could get out of Betty just then was that he was not so young as he looked. But I heard, presently, that he had told her he was "chucking the army." His father was growing feeble, and wanted his son to settle down and nurse the family constituency. I remember how annoyed Betty was at my saying that, whether Ranny was old enough to think of marrying or not, I certainly couldn't imagine such a boy being a Member of Parliament. Betty quoted Hermione. Hermione, who knew much more about such things than I did, had said she was sure that Ranny would get into the House at the very next by-election. And Hermione had clinched this by adding: "Ranny Dallas always gets everything he wants."

I made up my mind that for Betty's sake I must keep my eyes open. All that I had seen in him so far was a fair, rather chubby young man, who was not really very good-looking, but who somehow made the impression of being so—chiefly, I think, because he looked so extraordinarily clean. And he had that smile which makes people feel that the world must be a nicer place than they had thought. Then, too, there was something rather nice in the way his hair simply would curl in wet weather, for all the plastering down. His round, blunt-featured face was clean-shaven; and if I had wanted to tease Ranny, I should have told him I was sure he hadn't long "got over" dimples. But Betty was right; he was older than he looked.

I tried to be with her whenever he was about. But this became more and more difficult. For often he came down without any warning. If they couldn't have him at the Hall, he would put up at the inn. And he seemed quite as content walking those two miles to the links, or clanking up and down the hilly road on a ramshackle bicycle he had found at the inn. Our jobbing gardener was overheard to say that *he* wouldn't be seen riding such a bicycle—"no, not on a dark night!" Ranny, as we knew, had two motor-cars of his own, and was very particular about their every detail. But he said all that the much-abused "bike" needed was a brake. Even without a brake it was "a lot better," he said, "than having to think about the shover-chap."

After all, whether Ranny was nominally at the inn, or staying with the Helmstones, he spent most of his time with them—and, for all I could do, he spent a good deal of the time with Bettina.

I still couldn't make up my mind whether he amused himself more with her or with Hermione. But there was no doubt in Lord Helmstone's mind. He used to chaff Hermione when Ranny wasn't there, and when he was there Ranny got the chaffing.

"What! you here again?" his lordship would say. "Why, I thought you'd only just gone." Then he'd ask, with a business-like briskness, what he'd come for.

"Why, to play a game o' golf with your lordship."

"Can't think what a boy of your age is doing with golf." Then he would say to us: "Here's a fella usen't to care a doit for golf—and now this passion!"

When Lord Helmstone said that—which, in the way of facetious persons secure from criticism, he did a great many times—a colour like a girl's would sometimes overspread Ranny's face, in spite of the implication being so little of a novelty. Then Lord Helmstone would call attention to Ranny's being "very sunburnt," and he would chuckle and rattle his keys. "You ought to run away and play cricket. Eh——?"

"In this weather?"

"Well, go deer-stalking, then. Or play polo. Something more suitable to your years than pottering about golf-links. Something vigorous. Keep down superfluous tissue. Eh—what?"

People liked teasing Ranny. He took it so charmingly.

When I admitted that much to Betty, she said he did take chaffing well, but she sometimes thought he got more than his share. Lord Helmstone, she said, never ventured to treat Mr. Annan in that way.

I said that was quite different, and we very nearly had a serious quarrel. When I saw that Betty really couldn't see the vast difference between making fun of that boy and making fun of a man like Eric Annan, I began to feel more anxious than ever about Betty.

This was the first year the Helmstones kept Christmas in the South.

They filled the great house full to overflowing for a dance on New Year's Eve. We had only our white muslin summer frocks to wear. But not even Bettina minded, and we had a most heavenly time. Hermione had taught us the new dances. She said she "never in all her born days knew anybody so quick as Bettina at learning a new step."

Even I danced every dance, and Bettina had to cut some of hers in two. There were several new young men in the house-party. Two were brothers, and both sailors. The oldest one danced better than any man we had ever seen, and he would have liked to dance with Bettina the whole night long. It was our first ball, and Betty was only sixteen. So perhaps it was not very strange that the music and the motion and all the admiration went to Betty's head. For she did behave rather badly to Ranny. When she had danced three times with the oldest sailor—Captain Gerald Boyne—Ranny took her into a corner and remonstrated. I saw he looked pretty serious, but I didn't know till she and I were undressing in our own room that night, or rather morning—I didn't know how strongly he had spoken.

We had found our mother waiting for us, and we were both a little remorseful for being so late when we saw how tired she looked. "But you know we asked you if we might stay to the end." Then, I told her they had all begged us to wait for one or two more dances after the musicians went away, and how a friend of Lady Helmstone's played waltzes for us.

My mother thought it a pity to keep London hours in the country. We were to get to bed now as quickly as possible, and tell her "all about it in the morning."

So we took the candle and went away to our own room. It suddenly looked different to me—this room Bettina and I had shared all our lives. The ceiling seemed to have dropped a foot. But all the same it looked very white and kind in the dim light. Bettina ran and pulled back one of the dimity curtains. Yes, the moon was brighter than ever! Betty threw open the window and leaned out. Oh, what a pity to go to bed when the world was looking like this!

We had had a green Christmas, and the wind that blew in was not cold; but I thought how horrified my mother would be to see Betty leaning out of a window in January, with the night-wind blowing on her neck. We quarrelled a little, very softly, about shutting the window. Bettina was still flushed and a good deal excited. Rather anxious, too, about what had happened at the ball. But she defended herself. She overdid her air of justification—"such perfect nonsense Ranny's making all that fuss, just because a person naturally likes to waltz with a man who dances so divinely!"

I asked what, precisely, Ranny had said.

"Oh, he said he had hoped I would care to dance with him. And, of course, I said I did. I had already given him the first polka, and I had promised him——" She broke off. Nobody had ever been quite so reasonable as she, or so unreasonable as Ranny. He had tried to prevent her dancing *at all* with Captain Boyne.

"But you had already danced three times with Captain Boyne," I reminded her.

"Well, what of that?" she demanded, in a quite un-Betty-like way. And instead of undressing she followed me about the room, her cheeks very bright as she told me how that unreasonable Ranny had "kept saying that he 'made a point of it.' Then my partner for the mazurka came, and I saw Ranny go over to you. What did he say?" she asked, so eagerly that she forgot to keep her voice down.

My mother knocked on the wall. "Go to sleep, children," she called.

We both answered "Yes," and I began hurriedly to undo Betty's gown. But she never stopped twisting her head round: "Go on, tell me. What did he say?"

I told her, a little impatiently, that he hadn't said anything in particular—he hadn't tried to make himself the least agreeable, and he danced badly.

"Danced badly?" said Bettina, as though it were quite a new idea. "I think that must have been your fault. He dances quite well with me."

"Yes," I admitted, "he does dance best with you."

Then she told of the part Hermione had played. Nothing escaped Hermione, and as soon as she got wind of what was happening, she egged Betty on. Hermione had laughed out, in the most meaning way, when she saw Ranny coming towards Betty in the interval with "blood in his eye," as she expressed it. She whispered to Betty that Ranny was far too used to having his own way. "'But you'll see, you'll have to give in,'" Hermione said, and went off laughing just as Ranny came up.

And he began badly: "'You've told Boyne he can't have this waltz?'"

Betty said "No."

"'Why not? *Why* haven't you told him?'"

"He would ask for a reason."

"'Very well, give it.'"

"'I don't know any reason,'" Betty said.

"'The reason is . . .' Then he stopped, and seemed to change his mind. He began again: 'The reason is, you are going to sit out with me.' And then," Betty ended nervously, "Gerald Boyne came, and—we waltzed that time too."

"Yes," I said severely, "everybody was saying, 'Those two again!' And I didn't see you dance with Ranny at all after that."

No; but it wasn't her fault. "It was quite understood he was to have the cotillion."

"Then it was very wrong of you to dance the cotillion with Captain Boyne. It was making yourself conspicuous."

She protested again that it wasn't her fault. "I kept them all waiting as it was. You saw how I kept them waiting for Ranny, till everyone was furious. And as he didn't come, I had to dance with whoever was there."

"I suppose what made him angry was my going off for that horrid waltz after he had said he 'made a point of it'—I wasn't to dance again with 'that fellow.' And then, what do you think I said?" Bettina took hold of my arm, so I couldn't go on braiding my hair. "I said he was jealous of Captain Boyne, or why should he call him 'that fellow'? Even at the moment I felt how horrid that was of me; for it's not a bit like Ranny to be jealous in a horrid way, calling people 'fellows.' So I said: 'If the Boynes aren't nice, why are they here?' And Ranny said: 'Oh, Gerald Boyne's people are all right. His brother is all right. But I shouldn't want you to dance with Gerald if you were my sister. And if you were my wife, I should forbid it.' "

" 'But,' I said, 'I'm *not* your sister!'—Betty tossed her head, laughing softly—'and I'm not your wife——' "

I asked her if she had said it like that?

Yes, she had. "And I said, too—I said it was 'fortunate.' " Then without the least warning, poor Betty sat down on the foot of her bed and began to cry.

I put my arm round her. And she pulled her bare shoulders away. "You needn't think I'm crying about Ranny," she said. "I suppose it's being so angry makes me cry."

"You are crying because you are over-tired," I said, and I began to take off her shoes and stockings.

"I'm *not* crying because I'm tired, but because"—she wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her nightgown—"it's a disappointment to see anyone so silly . . . making 'points' of such things as waltzes."

When she was ready for bed, she stood meditating a moment. And then: "Ranny has never struck me as one of the horrid, unforgiving sort of people. Has he you?"

"Oh, no," I said, and I made her get into bed. I covered her up. But it was no use; she threw back the eiderdown, and sat bolt upright.

"——asking me like that, *at a ball,* if I liked Captain Boyne best—a man I'd never seen before —don't you call it very rude?"

"No; only a little foolish——"

Another knock on the communicating door. "If you children keep on talking I shall have to come in."

We promised we wouldn't say another word. But more than once Betty began: "Ranny——"

"Sh!" I said.

The quarrel about the window had ended in our leaving it a couple of inches open, and the curtains looped back. As we lay there, the room grew brighter; so bright that every little treasure on the long, narrow shelf above each bed could be plainly seen. All the small vases and pictures and china animals—all the odds and ends we had cherished most since we were babies.

When Bettina had come in that night, the first thing she did was to clear a space for her cotillion favours. The moonlight showed the brilliant huddle of fan and bonbon-basket tied with rose-colour, and, most conspicuous of all, the silver horn hung with parti-coloured ribbons.

When we had lain quiet in our beds for ten minutes or so, Bettina pulled out a pillow from under her head, and propped it so that the moon couldn't shine any longer on the be-ribboned horn. And neither could Betty's eyes rest on it any more. She lay still for some time, and I was falling asleep, when I heard her bed creak. She had pulled herself half out of the covers, and was leaning over the pillow-barrier. She took the horn and the other favours, one by one, and with much gravity thrust them under the bed.

A sigh of satisfaction and a settling down again.

I turned and smiled into my pillow. It was so exactly the sort of thing Bettina used to do when she was in the nursery—punishing her toys when things went wrong.

What a blessing, I said to myself, that I was coming to like Ranny Dallas. For, quite certainly, he was going to be my brother-in-law.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CLOUD AGAIN

THE very next day Ranny Dallas went away to shoot somewhere in the North.

Bettina did not hide from me how unhappy she was.

" Perhaps he will write," I said.

" He isn't the sort that writes—not even when he's friends with a person." Then, with a rather miserable laugh, Betty added: " He *says* he can't spell."

So I gathered that she had asked him to try.

And I gathered, too, that Hermione made light of the disagreement at the ball. She predicted that he'd be wanting to come back in a week or two, and Betty would find he had forgotten about the Battle of the Boyne.

We all came tacitly to agree that was precisely what would happen—all, that is, except my mother, who knew nothing about the matter.

It was a somewhat subdued Bettina who began that year; but I don't think it was in the Bettina of those days to be unhappy long.

(Oh, Bettina! how is it now?)

I don't know how anyone so loved and cherished could have gone on being actively unhappy. Besides, though the weeks went by and still Ranny did not reappear, there was a family reason to account for that. His father was very ill. Ranny's place was at home.

Hermione often gave us news of him that came through friends they had in common. And she spoke as though any week-end that found his father better, Ranny might motor down.

So we waited.

Bettina was a great deal with the Helmstone girls and their friends.

As for me, I was a great deal with my books in the copse. February, that year, was more like April, and all the violets and primroses rejoiced prematurely.

I, too.

I was extraordinarily happy. For I was sure I was finding a way out of all our difficulties. A glorious way. A way Eric would applaud and love me for finding—all alone like this.

I had a recurring struggle with myself not to write and tell him. When I had been "good" and wanted to give myself a treat, I allowed myself to go over in imagination that coming scene in which he should be told the Great Secret.

* * * * *

My mother sometimes spoke a little anxiously about Bettina's being so much with Hermione. She surprised me one day by asking me outright if I thought the increasing intimacy was likely to do Bettina harm.

My feeling about it was too vague to produce. I could only suggest that if she was afraid of anything of the kind, why should she not speak to Betty?

"The child has so few pleasures," was the answer, with that brooding look of tenderness which the thought of Betty often brought into my mother's face. "Does she tell you what they talk about?"

"Oh, the usual things!" I answered discreetly. "Clothes, and people and dogs."

"Oh, as for dogs!——" My mother dismissed the Chows. Bettina, in an unguarded moment, had admitted that she thought she could care for one dog. But she couldn't possibly care for eighteen. "What people do they discuss?"

"Oh, pretty much everybody, I should say."

She looked at me. "But some more than others. The Boynes, for instance."

When I said I didn't think so, my mother seemed a little chilled, as though she might be feeling "out of things."

Her face troubled me. "I am afraid," I said, "that you are thinking Betty and I have been leaving you a good deal alone of late."

"Oh," she answered hastily, "I was not thinking about myself."

At that, of course, conscience pricked the more. "Anyhow, *I* have been away too much," I confessed. "And there's no excuse for me. For Betty is the one they chiefly want."

She saw I was making resolutions. "I like you two to be together," she said. "Bettina needs you more than I. I should feel much less easy in my mind about Bettina if you weren't there to watch over her, and" (she added significantly) "to tell me anything I ought to know."

As I look back, I pray that my mother did not feel we were growing away from her. But I cannot be sure some fine intuition did not visit her of the difficulty of confidence on our part—of how our very devotion and craving for her good opinion made Betty, for instance, shy of telling her things that a younger sister could easily tell to one near her own age. I knew my mother's view about the relations that should exist between mothers and daughters. I made up my mind to speak to Betty about it. So I asked her one night if she didn't think she ought to "let her know about Ranny."

"Heavens, no! She is the last person I could tell!"

I felt for my mother the wound of that. And why, I asked Bettina, did she feel so?

Almost sulkily she said that if I wanted our mother told things, I could tell her about myself.

"What on earth do you mean?" I said. "There's nothing to hear about me."

"Oh, very well," Betty said; "then there's nothing to tell."

And the sad part of it was that, after that, Betty began to be reserved with me too.

I was so afraid of the effect of our secretiveness on my mother that I learned how to interest her in people neither Betty nor I were the least interested in. I saved up stories and "characteristics " to tell. The very success of these small efforts gave me secretly a sense of the emptiness of her life. To have nothing to think about but a couple of girls!—girls who were thinking all the while about things their mother didn't know. I could have cried out at the dreadfulness of such a fate. I felt it uneasily as a menace. Could she, when she was in her teens, have felt the least as I did? Oh, impossible! And yet . . .

" Tell me about when you were young," I said; but with the new insistence, now, of one bent on grasping the unexplained things in another's life, the better to understand the unexplained things in her own.

I could not make much of the few bony facts. Her father had had a small Government post, and she had told us before that when she was three she lost her mother. The only new fact to emerge was that she had not been happy at home. She tried to make out the reason was that she loved fields and gardens, and her father's pursuits kept them in the town. But try as I might I couldn't see the life she led there. I struggled against the sense of my impotence to realise her under any conditions but those at Duncombe. Feeling myself incredibly bold, I reminded her of old sayings about confidence between mothers and daughters. "I am always telling you things about us. You know exactly," I said (unconscious at the moment of the lie)—"you know all that happens to us, and what life looks like at every turn. We know so little about you except where the house was you lived in, and that it was dingy and big."

I could not have approached her in any way more telling than to make confidence on her part seem a corollary to confidence on ours. She cast about with an indulgent air for something new. And then I heard for the first time of the "sort of cousin" who had come to keep house for my grandfather, and to bring up the little girl of four. I wondered the more at so important a figure having been left out of all previous pictures, when I heard that my grandfather had cared more for this "sort of cousin" than he had cared for his only child. The cousin must have been a horrible woman, though my mother told me so little about her, I cannot think how I knew. The most definite thing that was said was: "She brought out all that was least good in your grandfather."

And when he ceased to care for the cousin in one way, she made him care for her in another. "She ministered to all his whims and perversities." My mother dismissed the first sixteen years of her life with: "I had seen a great deal of evil before I was grown; mercifully, I met your father when I was still very young."

He was the one man, I gathered, whom she had ever found worthy of all trust, all love; and she had been so glad to leave home—to leave England!

But out there in India she must have seen plenty of nice army people.

Oh, plenty of army people.

She seemed not to want to dwell much even on the happy time. She had her two children in three years. The babies kept her at home, and she had loved being at home with the babies—and above all with my father in his spare hours. Then, as we knew, he had been killed out tiger-hunting. And she broke off, "Now go on about the Boynes."

I asked her, mischievously, why she took such an interest in the Boynes, as though I had not tried to bring that very thing about. Her ideal of "the confidence that should exist" broke down even here; the navy, she said evasively, was "the finest of the services."

"Not finer than the army," I protested.

"Yes, finer than the army. Peace was the real 'enemy' to soldiers; but peace did not demoralise sailors, for there was always the sea for them to conquer. Was Hermione expecting to see the Boynes soon again?"

I smiled inwardly. She might as well have confessed that she thought the older Boyne might "do" for me, and the younger Boyne for Betty.

But what had become of the ideal of confidence?

Confidence, to be complete, must needs be mutual. If Betty and I had not been able to tear out of our hearts and hold up for inspection those shy hopes of ours, neither had our mother been able to show us the true face of memory. I did not know then how hard this was to do, or that the faithfullest intention must fall short; that genius itself cannot pass on to others all the poignancy of past Hope, or—mercifully—more than a pale reflection of past Despair.

There are no Dark Ages more impenetrable than those that lie immediately behind. They may put on an air of the explained and the familiar; they are a mystery for ever and for ever sealed.

The young are secretly perplexed when the great words are used about the immediate past. They hear of Love and Joy, and when they see the issue, stand appalled.

The idea that my mother could have felt, even about my own father, as I felt about—— No! I looked at her lying on the sofa with her eyes raised, and that air, anxious, intent, of the eavesdropper overhearing ill. So, then, one could have had all that love, and live to wear a look like this.

I held fast to such reassurance as I could recall. I remembered how, when we were younger, the mere tone of voice in which she said " your father " had seemed to bring back the warmth of that old Happiness, the lamp of that old Safety which had lit the happy time. Out of those far-off days, so momentous for Bettina and me—days which our mother must recall so vividly, and which I saw, now, I should never have the key to—there nevertheless had come to me, as come to other children, an echo of the music that had fallen silent; dim apprehensions of the beauty of life to those two lovers in the gorgeous East; and out of starlit Indian nights, "hot and scented," came vague wafts of bygone sweetness that moved me to the verge of tears. For it was all ended.

The strange thing was that, if she had never known that happiness, I should have felt less sorry for my mother now; less uneasy, in a way, at the Janus-face which life could hide until some unexpected hour.

Perhaps to a good many young people comes this haunting sense of the sadness of life to older people.

Especially when I thought of Eric I felt sharp pity for the race of older women—that grey majority for whom the Great Radiance had faded little by little; or those like my mother, out of whose hand the torch had been struck sharply and the darkness swallowed.

She very seldom touched the piano at this time; but often, when I was with her, that old feeling, which belonged to the evenings when she sang to herself, came back to me; a feeling of overwhelming sadness—and a fear.

Not even my secret could console me at such moments.

Eric will never come back, I said to myself; or he will come back with a wife. And, with that start I had learned from my mother—where was Betty?

She was late.

She was very late.

Unaccountably, alarmingly late.

CHAPTER XIV

WHERE IS BETTINA?

SHE had come running in a little after six o'clock to ask if we mightn't, both of us, go and dine with Hermione. I said I didn't see why Bettina shouldn't go, but we could not ask till my mother was awake; she had been having broken nights, and had just fallen asleep. So Bettina waited—nearly half an hour; still my mother slept. Then Bettina went away softly and dressed, " so as to be ready, in case."

She came back in her white frock, and still the sleeper had not waked nor stirred.

We went out in the hall and held a whispered conference. " She won't mind a bit," Bettina was sure. " It isn't as if it would do another time "—for the Helmstones were off again to-morrow. To clinch the argument, Betty told me that Hermione was expecting a letter, by the last post, from a friend of Ranny's; the one chance of hearing anything for Heaven knew how long.

So I let Bettina go.

* * * * *

My mother never woke till nearly nine, and of course the first thing she asked was, "Where is Betty?"

I said the maid had taken her, and Lady Helmstone had promised to send her home.

My mother was extremely ill-pleased that Bettina had gone. I had hoped that after that profound sleep she would wake up feeling better, as I have noticed the books nearly always say is what will happen. But I have noticed, since, that people who have been sleeping heavily at some unseasonable hour will often waken not refreshed and calmed, but out of sorts, and easily fretted by quite small things. They seem to require time before they can collect themselves and see the waking world in true proportion.

"We thought you wouldn't mind," I said.

And why *should* we? Why, above all, should I, who was so much older . . . ?

"To go anywhere else . . . I should have been against it," I said, "but to the Helmstones—where you let her go so constantly."

Saying that was a mistake.

Did not Betty know, above all, did not I know, the feeling of all the proper sort of mothers about young girls being away from home at night? Day-visiting—a totally different matter.

It was "the last evening for weeks," I reminded her. The Helmstones were going back to town. . . .

"I am not sorry," said my mother.

To my surprise the circumstance that seemed to annoy her most was that I had not gone with Bettina. She spoke to me in such a way I felt the tears come into my eyes. "I stayed on your account," I said.

"I have told you before"—and she told me again.

The supper tray came up, and went down scarcely touched. I asked if I should read to her.

No. There had been reading enough for that day.

So I mended the fire and brought some sewing.

She lay with the candle alight on the night table, waiting, listening.

"Who is to be there?"

"Oh, just the family, I suppose."

"Did you ask?"

"No—but Betty would have said, if . . ."

"——*never even asked!*"

We sat in silence.

"What time is it?"

"A quarter to ten."

"It is not like Bettina," she said presently. Bettina had never in her life done such a thing before.

I agreed she never had. If Bettina transgressed (and I admit that this was seldom), she never did so outright. And she was not sly. She did not so much evade as avoid an inconvenient rule.

My mother remembered, no doubt, that any sin of deliberate disobedience was far more likely to be mine. "I suppose the child, not able to ask my permission, came to you."

Yes, she had consulted me.

"And you took it upon yourself——"

I sat there, in disgrace.

Presently: "Perhaps the Boynes have motored down. Or one of them."

I said I had no reason to think so. All the same, I couldn't help welcoming the suggestion. For the idea that the Boynes, "or one of them," might be there, seemed, oddly enough, to excuse Bettina in my mother's eyes. And she was moved to make me understand why I had been reproached. We had to be far more careful than most girls. I heard about the heavy responsibility of bringing up " girls without a father."

I wondered in what way our father's being here would have altered the events of this particular evening. And since he had been quoted to justify anxiety, I made bold to go to him for cheer. At times of stress before, I had invoked my father. Not often, and all-cautiously. And never yet in vain. That night I wondered aloud what were the kind of things our father would have done.

" His mere being here would make all the difference."

His mere name certainly did much. Once again I had cause to bless him for taking the chill out of the domestic atmosphere.

She talked more about him and, by implication, more about herself that night than ever before or after. She told me of the mistakes he had saved her from. The things he had warned her against. Though he was brave as a lion, she would have me believe that he was afraid of trusting people. He had said to her after a certain occurrence——

" What occurrence? " I interrupted.

"No need to go into that," she said hurriedly. The point lay in his comment: "The safe course is not to trust anyone."

"That is very uncomfortable," I said.

It was better, she answered, to be less comfortable and safe, than to be more comfortable and——

"And what?"

She had stopped suddenly, and felt for her watch on the night table. "Ten minutes past. They will surely see that she starts for home by ten o'clock."

We sat for five minutes without speaking. I thinking of my father.

Then we heard the maids making the nightly round, shutting and locking up the house.

"Look out of the window," my mother said.

I could see nothing. The night was dark and still.

"She can't be long now," my mother said. "But go and tell them they may bolt the front door. We are sure to hear her coming up the walk."

She called me back. "Tell them not to forget to put the chain on the door."

Oh, the times we had been told that!

Downstairs I found the house shut up and barred as for a siege. The maids had done their work and vanished. I was the only creature stirring. Upstairs the same. My mother seemed not to hear me come back into the room. She was lying with the candle-light on her face, and on her face the old listening fear. What made her look like that?

If there had been anything, if there had been even that old mournful sound of the wind, I could have minded less. But the night was very quiet. The house was hushed as death. And still she listened.

Now and then she would lift her eyelids suddenly, and the intense white of the eyeballs shone, while she strained to catch some sound beyond my narrower range.

I sat there by the fire a long, long time. And she never spoke—until I, unable to bear the stillness any longer, fell back for that last time on the familiar Magic—my father, and the old, beautiful days. She stirred. She folded and unfolded her hands, and then took up the theme. But in a different key.

" The more I came to understand other women's lives," she said, " the more I saw that my happiness was like the safety of a person walking a narrow plank across a chasm." Then after a moment, she added: " A question of nice equilibrium."

" I don't know how you ever bore the fall," I said.

" The fall? "

" Yes—when father was killed—and all the happiness fell down."

Then she said something wholly incomprehensible at the time, but which I understand better now. " Perhaps," she said, " I would have borne what you call ' the fall ' less well if I hadn't known . . . there are worse than tigers in the world's jungle."

I felt I was on the track of some truer understanding, and a secret excitement took hold of me. " How was it you came to know that? " I asked.

" It is a thing," she said, " that even happy women learn." Then, hurriedly, she went on: " And it ended—my happiness—before any stain or tarnish dimmed it. All bright and shining one moment, the next all vanished."

I watched the face I knew so well. Covertly, I watched it. Saw the delicate lineaments a little pinched with anxiety. The eyes veiled one moment, the next lifting wide as at a sudden call.

"What was that?" she said.

I heard nothing.

Oftenest that quick lift of heavy eyelids, and the flash of bright fixity, would come without any following of speech. And the eloquence of that silence, tense, glittering, wrought more upon my nerves than any words. All my body strung to attention, I listened with my soul.

No sound.

No sound at all. Then, inwardly, I rebelled against the tyranny and waste of this emotion.

Why was she like this?

"Have they put on the chain?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And bolted the door?"

"Yes."

"How do you know they have bolted it?"

"I heard them."

"Heard *them?*"

"Heard the bolt."

"One may easily think a stiff bolt has gone home, and all the while——"

"But I am sure."

My easy certainty seemed to anger her. "I thought so, too, once." She said it with a vehemence that startled me.

After a moment: "Was that here?" I asked.

"No, no, no"—she shook it off.

I went and knelt down by the bed. "Tell me about it, mother."

"No, no. It is not the kind of thing you need ever know."

"How can you be sure? *You* weren't expecting anything to happen." I felt my way by the shrinking in her face. "Yet someone came to the unbolted door——?"

"What makes you think that!" she exclaimed, and I was hot and cold under her look.

"It—it only came into my head"; and then, with fresh courage, or renewed curiosity, "But I am right!" I said, with sudden firmness. "Isn't it so? You were horribly frightened, *weren't* you?" I touched her hand, expecting she would draw it away from me, but the fingers had locked on the silk frill of the quilt. They were cold; they made me think of death.

"Yes," she said, very low, "I was horribly frightened." I felt the shuddering that ran along her wrist, and the chill of that old fear of hers crept into my blood, too. She looked through me, as though I were vapour, as though the bodyless Dread her eyes were fixed on once again for that instant—as though *that* were the most real presence in the room.

"Tell me," I whispered, "tell me what it was."

"——impossible to talk about such things." She drew away her hand. "All you need to know is . . . the need of taking care. Of never running risks. What time is it?"

"Five minutes past eleven."

"Did Lady Helmstone say she and Hermione would walk back with Bettina?"

"No, she didn't say that."

"What did she say?"

"Just that she would send Betty home."

After some time she said quite suddenly: "That might mean alone in the motor."

I was going to say "Why not?" But as I looked up from my work at the face under the candle light, a most foolish and indefinable fear flashed across my mind—a feeling too ridiculous to own—sudden, indefinable dread of that in-offensive man, the Helmstones' head chauffeur. I had no sooner cast out the childish thought than I remembered the two under men. One only a sort of motor-house " odd man." To that hang-dog creature might fall the task of driving Betty home! I had thought of this man vaguely enough before, yet with some dash of human sympathy, for it was common talk that he was " put upon " by the other men. He was a weakling, and unhappy; now I suddenly felt him to be evil—desperate.

Oh, why had I let Bettina go!

Even if the chauffeurs, all three, were decent enough ordinarily, what if just to-night they had been drinking?

Betty coming across the deserted heath with a drunken driver——

Oh, God, I prayed, don't let anything happen to Bettina. . . .

* * * * *

A quarter past eleven.

I put on a bold face. " They wouldn't, I think, have a motor-car out for Betty at this hour, and the reason she is late is because she has told them she would like the walk."

"They will hardly send a woman with her at this time of night."

We both started violently, and all because a coal had fallen out of the grate on the metal fender.

My mother was the first to speak: "They are haphazard people, I sometimes think. . . . You don't suppose they would send her back with a groom. . . .?"

I said I was sure they would not, though an hour before I would have asked, Why not?

"Lord Helmstone couldn't be expected to put himself out. I *wish* I had not let the servants go to bed!" she exclaimed. "Why didn't you think of it? Of course, *they* should have gone and brought Bettina home."

I saw now how right and proper this would have been.

Half past eleven.

"It is very strange," I said.

"Go and look out again, you may see a lantern, or the motor-lamps."

I leaned out into the fresh-smelling darkness, and I saw nothing, I heard nothing.

I hung there, unwilling to draw in my head and admit the world without was empty of Bettina. She had been thrown out of the car. She was lying by the roadside somewhere, dead, that was why she didn't come home.

Suddenly I thought of Gerald Boyne. What if, after all, he had been dining there. He would be sure to want to bring Bettina home. Yes, and those casual Helmstones would turn Bettina over to him without a thought. A man Ranny wouldn't let his sister dance with in a room full of her friends. . . . Bettina, setting out with Gerald Boyne to cross the lonely heath—and never reaching home.

I knew all this was wild and foolish . . . then why did these imaginings make me feel I could not bear the suspense another moment? I shut the window and turned round. "You must let me go for her," I said.

The same suggestion must have been that moment on her lips. "Go, wake the servants," she said, "tell them to dress quickly. Get your cloak and light the lantern." She gave her short sharp directions. The young servant was to go with me. The old one was to lock the door behind us, and wait up with my mother. I went with a candle through silent passages, and knocked on doors.

I left the lantern burning down in the hall, and in my cloak went back to my mother's room.

She was leaning out, over the side of the bed listening.

"Aren't they ready?"

"They are only just roused."

"Servants take ten times as long to dress as ——Hark. Look out!"

I went back to the window and peered between the close-drawn curtains, with hands at my temples on either side of my eyes.

Nothing.

Except . . . Yes, I could hear the heavy step of the older woman down in the hall unlocking, unbolting, unchaining the door . . . that the housemaid and I might lose no time when she was ready.

The old woman must be waiting for us there below, with the lantern in her hand. A faint light was lying on the path. Not a sound now in all the world except my mother's voice behind me:

"You will take the short cut."

"Oh yes."

"And as you go don't talk—*listen.*"

"Listen!" I echoed, with mounting horror. "What should I hear?"

"How do we know?"

A chill went down my back.

The bedroom-door opened, and Bettina walked in.

"Such a nice evening! They've been teaching me bridge. Why have you put on your cloak? Why are you looking—oh! what has happened to you?"

Not very much was said to Bettina that night. She and two of the Helmstones' maids had come round by the orchard-gate, walking softly on the grass, "so as not to waken mother."

Only a little crestfallen, she was sent away to bed. My mother had motioned me to wait. As I watched Bettina making her apologies and her good-night, I thought how worse than useless had been all that anxiety and strain. "I shall remember to-night," I said to myself, "whenever I am frightened again."

But this, I could see before she spoke, was not the moral my mother was drawing. "Shut the door," she signed. And when I had come back to her, she drew herself up in bed and laid her hand on mine. "I want you to make me a promise," she said. "It is not fair to girls not to let them know that terrible things *can* happen. Promise me that you will take better care of Bettina. Never let anyone make you forget——"

I promised—oh, I promised that!

CHAPTER XV

MY SECRET

ERIC, like the violets and primroses, came earlier that third spring.

He seemed an old friend now, with an established footing in the house. Yet I had never been alone with him for more than five minutes before the day I told him my secret.

I had imagined it all so different from the way it fell out. I said to myself that I would meet him on his way home some evening, after he had played the last round. He would never know that I had been waiting for him in the copse; but that would be where I should tell him, standing by the nearer stile, where I had first seen kindness in his eyes.

My mother's health was worse again that spring, and when I wasn't studying I was much with her. After Eric came I stayed with her even more, for he said she had lost ground.

He discouraged her from coming downstairs. I believe he prevailed on her to keep her room chiefly by coming constantly to see her, bringing books and papers. My mother's sick-room was not like any other I have seen. It was full of light and air, and hope and pleasantness. She would lie on the sofa in one of the loose gowns she looked so lovely in, and we would have tea up there.

Nearly always I managed to go down to the door with Eric.

One day, that very first week, he came a good hour before we expected him. Bettina had shut herself up to write to Hermione, "——and I am afraid my mother is asleep," I said.

"Well, you are not," he answered. I saw his eyes fall on the books and papers that littered the morning-room sofa, and I felt myself grow red. The books would betray me!

The strange thing was that he pushed them away without ever looking at them! And he sat down beside me.

He had never been so close to me before. I think I was outwardly quite unmoved. But I could not see him, even at a distance, without inward commotion. When he sat down so near me, a great many pulses I had not known before were in my body began to beat and hammer. I felt my heart grow many sizes too big, and my breast-bone ache under the pressure. I said to myself the one essential was that he should not suspect—for him to guess the state he had thrown me into would be the supreme disaster. He might despise me. Almost certainly he would think I was hysterical. I knew the contempt he felt for hysterical women. Never, never should he think me one! I would rather die, sitting rigidly in my corner without a sign, than let him think I had any taint of the hysterical in me!

Above all, for my Great Secret's sake, I must show self-command. Upon that I saw, in a flash, this was the ideal moment for telling him about The Plan.

He asked how had my mother slept. I don't know what I said. But I remember that he spoke very gently of her. And he said I must husband my strength. I stayed too much indoors, he said. Hereafter I was to take an hour's brisk walk every day of my life.

I told him I couldn't always do that in these days.

"You must," he said.

I thought of my books, and shook my head.

"Won't you do it if I ask you to?" he said.

He leaned a little towards me. I dared not look up.

"I understand your not wanting to leave your mother," he said. "But couldn't your sister——" Then, before I could answer, "No," he said, smiling a little, "I suppose she couldn't."

There was something in his tone that did not please me. "You mean Betty is too young?"

No; he didn't mean that, he said.

What *did* he mean?

"Well, she has other preoccupations, hasn't she?" he said lightly.

"You mean Hermione? Hermione and all the family are in London."

No; he didn't mean Hermione. I was in too much inner turmoil to disentangle his meaning then. For he went on quickly to say: "Suppose I sit with your mother for that hour, while you go out and get some exercise?"

I was to lose an hour of him—tramping about alone! The very thought gave me an immense self-pity. My eyes grew moist. . . . "Come, come!" I said to myself, "keep a tight rein!"

Just as I was getting myself under control again, he undid it all by laying his hand over mine.

"Let me help you," he said.

"Oh, w-will you?" I stammered; while to myself I said: "He is being kind; don't think it is more—don't *dare* think it is more!"

Though I couldn't help thinking it *was* more, I turned to the thought of my Great Scheme as a kind of refuge from a feeling too overwhelming to be faced.

And yet, I don't know, it may have been partly some survival in me of the coquetry I thought I hated; that, too, may have helped to make me catch nervously at a change of subject. So I interrupted with something about: "If you really do want to help me——"

But I found I could not talk coherently while his touch was on my hand. The words I had rehearsed and meant to say—they flew away. I felt my thoughts dissolving, my brain a jelly, my bones turning to water.

With the little remnant of will-power left I drew my hand away. My soul and my body seemed to bleed at the wound of that sundering. For in those few seconds' contact we two seemed to have grown into one. I found I had risen to my feet and gone to sit by the table, with a sense of having left most of myself behind clinging to his hand. I made an immense effort to remember things he had told us about those early struggles of his. And I asked questions about that time—questions that made him stare: "How did you guess? What put that in your head?" I said I imagined it would be like that.

"Well, it *was* like that."

"And you overcame everything!" I triumphed. "You are the fortunate one of your family."

He laughed a little grim kind of laugh. "The standard of fortune is not very high with us." He looked thoroughly discontented.

"I am afraid," I said, "you are one of the ungrateful people."

What had he to be grateful for? He threw the question at me.

"Why, that you have the most interesting profession in the world," I said.

"You don't mean the practice of medicine!—mere bread-and-butter."

"You don't love your profession!"

He smiled, and that time the smile was less ungenial. But I had not liked the tone of patronage about his work.

"They were all wasted on you, then—those splendid opportunities—the clinic in Hamburg, the years in Paris——"

"Oh, well"—he looked taken aback at my arraignment—"I mayn't be a thundering success, but I won't say I'm a waster."

"If you don't love and adore the finest profession in the world——! Yes, somebody else ought to have had your chances. Me, for instance."

"You! Oh, I dare say," his smile was humorous and humouring.

"You think I'm not in earnest. But I am." I went to the cupboard where Bettina and I each had a shelf, and brought out an old wooden workbox. I opened it with the little key on my chain. I took out papers and letters. "These are from the Women's Medical School in Hunter Street"—I laid the letters open before him—"answers to my inquiries about terms and conditions."

He glanced through one or two. "What put this into your head?" he said, astonished, and not the least pleased so far as one could see. "How did you know of the existence of these people?"

"You left a copy of the *Lancet* here once." Something in his face made me add: "But I should have found a way without that."

"What way—way to what?" He spoke irritably in a raised voice. I looked anxiously at the door. "We won't say anything just yet to my mother," I begged. "My mother wouldn't—understand."

"What wouldn't she understand?" All his kindness had gone. He was once more the cold inaccessible creature I had seen that first day stalking up to Big Klaus's door.

"What I mean is," I explained, quite miserably crestfallen, "my mother wouldn't understand what I feel about studying medicine. But *you*"—and I had a struggle to keep the tears back—"I've looked forward so to telling you——"

He turned the papers over with an odd misliking expression.

"For one thing, you could never pass the entrance examination," he said. I asked why he thought that.

"Do you see yourself going to classes in London, cramming yourself with all this?"—his hand swept the qualifications list.

"Not classes in London," I said. "But people do the London Matriculation without that. I am taking the University Tutorial Correspondence Course," I said.

I was swallowing tears as I boasted myself already rather good at Botany and French. My mother thought even my German tolerable.

I picked up the little pamphlet issued by the University of London on the subject of Matriculation Regulations, and I pointed out Section III., "Provincial Examinations." The January and June Matriculation Examinations were held at the Brighton Municipal Technical College. He could see that made it all quite convenient and easy.

"I can see it is all quite mad," he answered. "Suppose by some miracle you were to pass the entrance exams.—have you any idea how long they keep you grinding away afterwards?"

"Five to seven years," I said.

"Well! can't you see what a wild idea it is?"

I said to myself: he knows about our straitened means. "You mean it costs such a great deal."

"It costs a great deal more than you think," he said, shifting about discontentedly in his chair.

Then I told him that my mother had some jewels. "I am sure that when she sees I am in earnest, when I have got my B. A., she will be willing I should use the jewels——"

"It's a dog's life," he said, "for a woman."

I gathered my precious papers together. "You think I shall mind the hard work. But I shan't."

"It isn't the hard work," he said, "though it's not easy for a man. For a woman——" he left the woman medical-student hanging over the abyss.

For all my questions I could not bring him to the point of saying what these bugbears were.

He was plainly tired of the subject.

My first disappointment had yielded to a spiritless catechism of how this and how that.

My persistent canvass of the matter brought him nearer a manifestation of ill-temper than I had ever seen in him.

There was a great deal, he said, that he couldn't talk about to a girl of eighteen. But had I or anybody else ever heard of a man who was a doctor himself wanting his sister, or his daughter to study medicine? He had never known one. *Not one.*

I confessed I couldn't think why that was, except that nobody belonging to a girl ever wanted her to do anything, except—I stopped short and then hurried on. . . . " But after all, you know that women do go through the medical schools and come out all right."

He shook his head. " They've lost something. Though I admit most of the women you mean, never had the thing I mean."

I said I didn't understand.

" Well, you ought to. You've got it." He looked at me with an odd expression and asked how long I'd had this notion in my head. I said a year. " All this time! You've been full of this ever since I was here last!"

I lied. I said I had thought of absolutely nothing else all that time. He stood up . . . but I still sat there wondering what had made me tell him that lie.

" You won't go," I said, " without seeing my mother."

To-day—he hadn't time.

I went down with him as usual to the front door, weeping inwardly, yet hoping, praying, that before the door closed he would say something that would help—something kind.

He often said the best things of all just as he was going—as though he had not dared to be half so interesting, or a tenth so kind, but in the very act of making his escape.

To-day he put on his covert coat in a moody silence. Still silent, he took his hat.

I stood with the door-knob in my hand. "You think, then, even if Aunt Josephine helped——"

"Who is Aunt Josephine?"

"My father's step-sister. She is well off."

Aunt Josephine's riches made no impression upon him. He was going away a different man from the one who had come in and pushed away my papers, to sit beside me and to take my hand. He pulled his stick out of the umbrella-stand.

"You feel sure I couldn't?" I pleaded at the door.

"I feel sure you could do something better."

He was out on the step. "Good-bye," he said, with the look that hurt me, so tired—disappointed.

He had come for peace—for my mother's tranquil spirit to bring rest to his tired mind. And all he had found here was my mother's daughter fretting to be out in the fray! I had not even listened. I had interrupted and pulled away my hand.

After I shut the door, I opened it again, and called out: "Oh, what was it you were going to tell me?"

"It wouldn't interest you," he said, without even turning round.

CHAPTER XVI

THE YACHTING PARTY

I HAD to make use of Eric's old plea, " pressure of work," to account for his going away without seeing my mother.

I watched the clock that next afternoon in a state of fever. Would he come again at three, so that we might talk alone? No. The torturing minute-hand felt its way slowly round the clock-face, its finger, like a surgeon's on my heart, pressing steadily, for all my flinching, to verify the seat and the extent of pain.

Four o'clock. Five. Half-past. No hope now of his coming, I told myself, as those do who cannot give up hope.

My mother questioned me. What had Mr. Annan said the day before? Had he, then, come so early for " nothing in particular "? I said that I supposed he had come early because he found he could not come late.

About six o'clock, as I was counting out some drops for my mother, a ring at the front door made me start and spill the liquid on the table.

He had relented! He was coming to say the things I had been so mad as to prevent his saying yesterday. We listened. My heart fell down as a woman's voice came up. Lady Helmstone! Wanting to see my mother "very particularly." We wondered, while the maid went down to bring her, what the errand might be which could not be entrusted to Bettina. For, wonderful to say, Bettina was to be allowed to go to a real dinner-party that night at the Hall. Hermione had written from London, begging that Betty might come and hear all about the yachting party.

This was not the first we had heard of the project. It had been introduced in a way never to be forgotten. We had counted on hearing from the Helmstones all the thrilling details about the Coronation which was fixed for the coming June. We felt ourselves sensibly closer to the august event through our acquaintance with the Helmstones. Lesser folk than they might hope to see the great Procession going to the Abbey—King and Queen in the golden Coach of State, our particular friends the little Princes and the young Princess in yet another shining chariot, followed by the foreign Potentates, the State officials, and by *our* Peer of the

Realm with all his brother Lords and Barons in scarlet and ermine; and the flower of the British Army, a glancing, flaming glory in the rear.

The highly fortunate might see this Greatest Pageant of the Age on its return from the Abbey, when the Sovereigns would be wearing their crowns and their Coronation robes.

But the Helmstones! They would actually see the anointing and the crowning from their High Seats in the Abbey. Even a girl like Hermione would be asked to the State Ball.

Never before had we realised so clearly the advantages of being a Peer.

We thought the Helmstones very modest not to be talking continually about the Coronation. While we waited, impatient to hear more on the great theme, they had introduced the subject of the yachting trip. I remembered this while Lady Helmstone was coming up the stair—I remembered our bewilderment at learning that they hoped to sail "about Easter," and to be cruising in the Ægean at the end of June.

They had forgotten the Coronation!

Then the shock of hearing Lord Helmstone thank God that he would "be well out of it."

London, he said, would be intolerable this season. He had let the house in Grosvenor Square "at a good round Coronation figure" to a new-made law-lord—"sort of chap who'll revel in it all." Many of the greatest houses in London were to be let to strangers.

The yachting trip was one of many arranged that people might escape "the Coronation fuss."

According to my mother, Lord Helmstone and his like showed a kind of treason to the country in not doing their share to make the symbolic act of Coronation a public testimony to English devotion to the Monarchy. What would become of the significance of the occasion if the aristocracy (upholders of that order typified by the King) deserted the King on a day when the eyes of the world would be upon the English throne.

Oh, it was pitiable! this leaving the great inherited task to the upstart rich. Lord Helmstone's act showed blacker in the light of remembered honour done him both by the present King and by his father. We knew Lord Helmstone had liked the late King best. Yet even of him we had heard this unworthy subject speak with something less than reverence. With bated breath

Bettina and I had reported these lapses, as well as the late ironic reference to "the bourgeois standards of the present Court." Our mother said that only meant that the life of the King and Queen was a model for their people. "But Lord Helmstone laughed," we persisted—"they all laughed."

We saw we were wrong to dwell upon so grave a lapse. Lord Helmstone's taste was questionable, we heard. "He does not scorn the distinctions His Majesty confers." There were people—my mother was sorry if Lord Helmstone was one—who thought it superior to smile at the Fount of Honour.

Smiling at Founts was one thing. But to go a-yachting when you might help to crown the King of England, Emperor of India, Defender of the Faith. . . . !

Bettina and I had agreed privately that the reason she was allowed the unheard-of licence of dining out alone was that she might embrace this final opportunity of probing the mystery before the Helmstones vanished. They had come down from London for their last week-end before going to Marseilles to join the *Nautch Girl.*

And now Lady Helmstone was passing our bedroom, where Bettina on the other side of the closed door sat working feverishly to finish putting some fresh lace on the gown she was to wear at dinner.

Lady Helmstone came into my mother's room, very smart and smiling, and without preamble proposed to take Bettina along as one of her party. Equally without hesitation my mother said the idea was quite impracticable.

Lady Helmstone was a person accustomed to having her own way. "You cannot expect," she said, "you cannot *want* to keep your girls at home for ever."

"N-no," my mother agreed, with that old look of shrinking. But Bettina was far too young——

A niece of Lord Helmstone's, just Bettina's age, was to be of the party.

Ah, well, Bettina was different. Bettina was the sort of child who had never been able to face the idea of a single night away from home. And this was a question of a cruise of—how many weeks?

"Six months," said Lady Helmstone cheerfully.

My mother stared. Lady Helmstone could not have meant the proposal seriously—" Bettina would die of home-sickness."

Lady Helmstone ventured to think not. As I have said, she was ill-accustomed to seeing her invitations set aside. She spoke of Hermione's disappointment . . . they were all so fond of Bettina. She should have every care.

My mother made her acknowledgments—the suggestion was most kind; most hospitably meant. But Lady Helmstone had only to put it to Bettina. She would soon see.

Lady Helmstone smiled. " I think you will find Bettina would like to come with us."

I was annoyed at her way of saying that, as if she knew Bettina better than we. I went into the next room, and got out my school-books. I left the door open in case my mother should need me, and I heard them talking about " daughters."

There was much to be said, Lady Helmstone thought, for the way they did things in France. My mother preferred the English way.

" And yet you will not take it," said the other, with that suavity that allowed her to be impertinent without seeming so. " I don't think—living as you do—you quite realise the trouble mothers take to give their girls the sort of opportunity you are refusing." There were changes —" great and radical changes," she said—changes which my mother, leading this life of the religieuse, was possibly not aware of.

My mother deprecated as much as she had heard of these changes.

" Ah, but, *necessary*—a question of supply and demand. You can afford to disregard them only if you do not expect your daughters to marry."

My mother said stiffly that she saw no reason to suppose her daughters would not marry—" all in good time." They were very young, Bettina a child——

" She is very little younger than I was when I married; or than you were yourself, if I may hazard a guess." My mother was silent. She was still silent when Lady Helmstone laid down the law that a girl's best " opportunities " came before she was twenty. In these days of Gaiety girls and American heiresses the whole question had grown incomparably more difficult. " Mothers with a sense of family duty—I may say of patriotism—have to think seriously about these things." She herself, having married off three daughters and two nieces, might be considered something of an expert. Indeed, she was so regarded. She had advised hundreds. There was her cousin Mrs. Monmouth. The Monmouths were not at all well off. "I used to come across Rosamund trailing her three girls about London. . . . *Three!* Conceive the indiscretion!—only the young one really caring about balls—the other two going stolidly through with it, season after season. The mother, every year more worn, more haggard—I changed all that! One chaperon will do for a dozen. A group of us took turns. 'Send the youngest to dance,' I said; 'and *never* more than two at a time.' After all, very little is done at balls!" She spoke impatiently, in a brisk, business-like tone. "As a rule, only boys and ineligibles care about dancing. The thing for people in Rosamund's position to do—I told my cousin, the thing to do was to spend August in London."

There was a pause.

"Do people not leave London in August nowadays?" my mother said, in a tone of perfunctory politeness.

"*All the other women leave,*" said Lady Helmstone, with a rusé significance. "The field is clear. There are always men in London when the town is supposed to be empty. Often Parliament is still sitting. Men have nowhere to go. They accept with gratitude in August an invitation they wouldn't even trouble to answer in June. *August is the time.* I made Rosamund Monmouth see it. I made her give her common, or garden, cook a holiday. I made her engage a chef—cordon bleu. 'You must give better dinners than men get at their clubs.' She did."

There was another significant pause.

"The least attractive of the Monmouth girls married the rising young barrister Harvey that very autumn. We called him 'Harvest.'" Her laugh rang lonely in the quiet room. "The other is engaged to the member for Durdan. He will be in the Cabinet when our side comes in. Both those girls would be manœuvring for partners at balls still, and their mother would be in her grave, but for . . ."

The interview ended stiffly.

The only part of my mother's share in it that I regretted was her suggesting that Lady Helmstone should not, after all, let Bettina know there had been any question of her going. "The child is already disturbed enough at the prospect of losing Hermione."

When Lady Helmstone was gone, my mother sat up with flushed cheeks, and said: "If Betty never went *anywhere,* I should not want her to go away in the care of a woman like that."

CHAPTER XVII

THE EMERALD PENDANT

I PUT the finishing touches to Bettina's dress in our mother's room that night, so that the invalid might have the pleasure of lying there and looking at Betty, all white and golden in the candle-light.

While I tied her sash I noticed her frowning at herself in the glass.

" I look dreadfully missish," she said.

When I protested, she said: " Worse, then! Like a charity child at a school-treat! "

We were amazed. My mother asked where she had got such ideas. I heard Hermione behind Betty's voice.

She turned round and faced our mother with her most beguiling air. " It's going to be mine some day . . . lend me the pearl and emerald pendant." That my mother should be surprised at the suggestion, seemed only natural. But I could not see why she should be so annoyed. I, too, begged her to let Bettina wear the pendant. After all, Bettina was in her seventeenth year . . . and this was a real party.

" A girl of sixteen wanting to wear a thing like that! "

Bettina frowned. How old must she be before she could wear the pendant?

My mother wouldn't say. . . .

After Bettina had gone, I asked about the market value of jewels.

My mother seemed to think the inquiry very odd and somehow offensive. I asked if she thought the big diamond star was worth as much as £600.

She said I appeared to have a very sordid way of looking at things whose real value was that they were symbolic of something beyond price.

I said I knew that. But did she not think that for some great and important end, my father would have been the first to say, let the jewels be sold?

My mother put her hand up to her eyes. I blew out one candle and set a shield before the other.

She spoke my name and I started—the voice sounded odd. I went back to the bedside. " Are you ill? " I said. She shook her head and motioned me to sit down.

Then she told me. We were living on the proceeds of the diamond star.

The pendant had been sold last summer. There was nothing more worth selling except the furniture, and possibly a few prints.

We owed Lord Helmstone six months' rent.

I met the shock with the help of my secret. I steadied myself against the thought that, at the worst, I would find the means (through Aunt Josephine or somebody) for qualifying myself to support my mother and sister. I saw myself, at the worst, a humble soldier enlisting in that army where Eric held command. I, too, marching with that high companionship . . . marching to the world's relief.

In the midst of telling how I was forging ahead with my London University Tutorial Correspondence, and to what the year's successful work was leading, I kept thinking that, after all, this ill wind might help to blow away the cloud that Eric's disapproval had brought lowering over the present and obscuring all the future. My mother will be proud of me, I thought. She will even be a little touched; and then, for all the light was so dim, I saw her face of horror!

It was a mad idea. Her daughter a " female doctor " ! Never!

" Not—not female doctor," I protested. " That *does* sound——"

" Well, you see for yourself how the very sound of it——"

I assured her that I didn't dislike the sound of " medical woman." But there was no necessity to emphasise " woman " at all; the only thing important was whether the person was qualified to treat the sick. People did not feel they had to say male doctor. " Doctor is enough."

I was told that the reason no one said male doctor was because " doctor " *was* male, and everyone understood that.

I left the point, and I pleaded my main cause with all my might. I hadn't any accomplishments—no music, nothing. " I'm not the decorative one, and I like ' doing things '; plain, everyday things." There had to be people like that.

It was all no use.

* * * * *

That confession of mine, more than hers about the jewels, goaded my mother into taking a step which even we, blind as we were, felt to be epoch-making in our history.

That same evening she began to talk about Aunt Josephine—to excuse her. Mrs. Harborough had been so wrapped up in her brilliant young step-brother (and Aunt Josephine would never allow the " step ") that *any* other person's coming in must inevitably have been resented. " She idolised your father." A woman of high character. Given to good works. Busied about the redemption of long-shoremen and about country treats for jam-factory girls. Knee-deep in philanthropy. And childless. She *could* not, especially now after that old first anger had long cooled, she could not be indifferent to the fate of her brother's children.

" Are you thinking of writing to her? " I said. She explained that for her to address Mrs. Harborough was, under the circumstances, hardly possible. But there was no reason in the world why I should not.

I felt there were reasons, but I could not think what they were. My mother, meanwhile, grew almost cheerful, outlining the sort of thing I might say. No requests in this first communication. A letter, merely—if it found her so inclined—merely to open a long-closed door.

I did not like my task. I decided I would put it off till morning, though I knew that at any time

I should find it easier to write: "Please lend me £1,000 for a course of study," than write such a letter as my mother had dictated.

* * * * *

Betty came back from her dinner-party in great excitement. Ranny Dallas had motored over from Dartmoor that very day—with a man friend. They had been at the Helmstones' to tea.

I wondered, dully, that Lady Helmstone had said nothing whatever about Ranny during her visit. She must have just parted from him. Another curious thing was that Ranny had not stayed for the dinner-party. He and his friend were at the inn.

"What in the world do you think that means?" I asked Bettina, glad enough to escape from my own thoughts.

She was smiling. "I think it is very natural."

And why was it natural for a luxurious young man to put up with tough mutton and watery potatoes at a village inn, when he and any friend of his were certain of a welcome, and the best possible dinner, in a house like the Helmstones'?

Betty merely continued to smile in that beatific, but somewhat foolish fashion. I said, rather more to make her speak than for any soberer reason, " Perhaps he isn't so sure of his welcome "; and then in a flash I saw quite clearly something I had been blind to till that instant. For all the liking the Helmstones felt for Betty they may not have liked being undeceived about Ranny's supposed devotion to Hermione. That this idea had never occurred to me before showed me stupid, I saw, as well as self-absorbed. But the idea would not have occurred to me at all, I think, but for some of the things Lady Helmstone had said to my mother that afternoon.

Betty was asking me with a superior air, if I couldn't understand that Ranny would " prefer to talk things over " before meeting her at a dinner-party " with everybody looking on." She reminded me a little tremulously that it would be their very first meeting "since . . ." There was a moment when I thought she was going to cry. 'And then, without any sense of transition, I wondered how anybody in the world could be as happy as Betty looked.

The next morning, still in a mood of the deepest dejection, I dated a sheet of paper, and began: "My dear Aunt Josephine."

I looked at the words for full five minutes, with a feeling of intense unwillingness to set down another syllable. And then I yielded to the impulse which made certain other words so easy, so delicious to say or trace. I took a fresh sheet. Before I knew, I had written: "Dear Mr. Annan."

Well, why not? Was it not better to write to him, rather than face another afternoon like yesterday? My mother wondering, suspicious; my own eyes flying back and forth like distracted shuttles from window to clock—from clock to window, hour after hour.

DEAR MR. ANNAN,—I have told my mother. She feels as you do. She does not like my idea. So I have agreed for the present not to think about it any more.

I was his "sincerely," and I sent the note by one of the little Klauses.

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CHAPTER XVIII

RANNY

I IMAGINED that day I should never again have to live through a time of such suspense.

Waiting, till I could get away without being noticed, to carry my note to Kleiner Klaus's.

Waiting, for the Klaus's boy to come home.

Waiting, while his mother brushed his clothes and cuffed him. Waiting, while he recovered his spirits. Waiting, while slowly, slowly, his mind took in the particulars of his errand, and the most particular part of it, in his eyes—the penny he should have when he brought me back an answer.

And the long hours of that afternoon waiting for the answer, or even for the errand-boy to come back. When I was not looking out of the window my mind was still so bent on listening for one particular footstep on the brick walk, and at the door his voice—the only voice in the world with meaning in it—that scarcely any impression was made on me by other steps and other voices. I heard them, subconsciously, to dismiss them; for everything was irrelevance that wasn't Eric.

But my mother interrupted my mechanical reading aloud. "Who," (with her air of listening to sounds beyond my ken) "who can all those people be?"

There was Bettina in the passage making frantic signs that I was to hurry out and speak to her. And voices of men and women came up from the open door. I recognised Lord Helmstone's. I heard him asking the maid if Mr. Annan were here.

"No? That's very odd," said Hermione in her sceptical way— "Perhaps he's come in without your knowing. Will you just find out?"

My mother, too, had heard Lord Helmstone's cheerful bass, suggesting that his party might take shelter here. I had not noticed before the slight rain falling. "Go and ask him to come upstairs," my mother said. And lower: "I don't want *him* to take it amiss." I saw she was thinking of her refusal to let Betty go on the yacht.

Betty was waiting for me in ambush near the head of the stair: "You must come down and help me. Ranny is there, too."

I was bewildered at finding so many at the door. For besides Lord Helmstone and Hermione, there was Lady Barbara, and Ranny Dallas and his friend—a cheerful, talkative, red-haired man they called Courtney.

The Helmstones were still discussing whether they should come in. Hermione said it was only a slight sprinkle, and her mother was expecting them back to tea. Lady Barbara, with engaging simplicity, insisted there was no object in going back without Mr. Annan.

I saw at once that Ranny looked different. Just in what way, or to what extent, I could not at first have said. A very little thinner, too little to account for the change I was dimly conscious of. And when he first came in, he came with some nonsense, and that pleasant laugh, that always "started things" in an easy harmonious key.

"We've descended on you," Lord Helmstone said, "like a posse of detectives. Sleuth-hounds on that fella Annan's track. We've our instructions to bag him and carry him home to tea."

Bettina (oh, I could have beaten her for that!) said Mr. Annan would very probably come in presently. And she led the way into the drawing-room, while I took Lord Helmstone upstairs. By the time I came down again Bettina had ordered tea.

Hermione turned round as I came in. "What have you done with my father! Now father's disappeared!"—as if she had only just grasped the fact. "Didn't I tell you," she said to Ranny, "Duncombe is a place where if a man goes in, he doesn't come out?"

Betty and I gave them tea.

I lashed myself up to being almost talkative. I am sure they never guessed the effort I was making. I had not taken my usual place for pouring out tea. I sat where I could see the gate. My mind and eyes were so on the watch for Eric I should not have noticed Ranny much, but for an odd new feeling of comradeship that sprang up, I cannot tell how, as the minutes went by and still brought no sign of Eric. Not even a note in answer to mine.

As tea went on, and I grew more miserable, I noticed that Ranny flagged, too. After saying something Ranny-ish enough, he would fall into quiet, looking straight in front of him as though we none of us were there. As though even Bettina were not there. Bettina's eyes kept turning his way. But Ranny never once looked at her. And the more I looked at him, the more I felt he was changed. He would rouse himself abruptly out of that new stillness and take part for a moment in the talk. His very laugh, that I have spoken of as so reassuring—his laugh most of all gave me a sense of uneasiness. It was a kind of laughter that seemed just a tribute to other people's light-heartedness and, more than anything about him, a betrayal of his own bankruptcy in cheer.

When he fell silent again, and in a way "out of the running," when that blindness came into his face, Ranny Dallas looks as I feel, I said to myself. And then I talked the more and smiled at everybody in a way probably more imbecile than pleasing.

I consoled myself with thinking neither Ranny nor I were being much noticed, for Hermione talked very fast, and rather louder than usual, to Bettina and to the other, newer, swain—one of the apparently endless supply of "weak-ending young men" as Ranny called them.

Under cover of Hermione's gaiety, I managed to ask Bettina what was the matter with Ranny.

" I don't know," she whispered.

I saw it was true. Bettina did not know.

She leaned across me to find a place on the crowded table for her teacup and the low voice was earnest enough: *" Find out."*

The rain had been only a passing shower.

" Oh, yes, the sun has come out—but my father hasn't! Didn't I say," Hermione laughed, " no man ever knows when to come away from this place? " Then she swept us all into the garden. " If he doesn't come soon I shall throw gravel up at the window. Isn't it this window? "

Bettina said very likely Lord Helmstone was having tea upstairs and that it had not gone up till after ours. Ranny and I left the new young man and Bettina trying to prevent Hermione from carrying out her audacious plan and apparently succeeding. For Lord Helmstone did not appear for another half-hour. And still no sign of Eric.

Ranny asked me how the sunk garden was coming on. I didn't like going so far from the gate, but Betty's earnest " find out " was ringing in my ears. I sent a searching look across the heath, and then Ranny and I left the others and went down to the rock-quadrangle that used to be so tidily affluent in stone-loving mosses, seedums and suchlike. The weeds were fast driving the more delicate things out of the neglected tangle. For the old gardener had been gone a year, now, and there was overmuch for a jobbing person to do in a day or two a week.

I apologised for the poor unkempt place, thinking how different I might have made it, but for the hours I spent over books. And would Eric have liked me better if——

I craned my neck, uneasy at not being able to see the gate nor any part of the bypath. Only the higher reach of heath road.

Ranny had not pretended to be listening. I don't think he so much as saw how changed the garden was. We talked about the new young man—" awful good sort," according to Ranny. But that testimony, too, he gave in an absent-minded, perfunctory way.

" Can't we sit down? " he said, looking blindly at a garden seat still shining-wet.

I said we'd better walk. I lead him back near enough the house to see if the others had waylaid Eric.

No, just the same group under my mother's window—Hermione and Babs arguing hotly about something. The red-haired young man aiming at an imaginary golf-ball with the crook-handle of his heavy walking-stick, and swinging it violently over his shoulder, that Bettina might see the approved position of feet and body before, and after, a furious drive. Whether Bettina made a practice of asking for this information I cannot say. But every man who came our way, young or old, was seized with an uncontrollable desire to teach Bettina the difference between good form and bad form at the game of golf.

Ranny had been walking with his head bent and no pretence at making conversation. When I stopped, he looked up suddenly and caught sight of the group. He wheeled about, and stood with his back to the house and his face averted from me as well.

"Look here," he said, "why shouldn't we go and meet Annan?—warn him—eh?"

My heart leapt at the suggestion. And yet. . . . "Why should you want to do that?" I said suspiciously.

"Oh, well, I don't care where we go—

only . . ." His voice sounded so queer I felt frightened.

" I don't think I'll go back to *them* just yet," he managed to bring out. " Do you mind? "

CHAPTER XIX

ANOTHER GIRL

We turned off through the shrubbery, and went out by the side gate along the bypath to the links.

Ranny walked behind, absolutely silent, till he burst out: "May I smoke?"

When he had lit a cigarette, I glanced back. I thought he looked a shade less miserable. I could see the four figures standing out against the house, and still no sign anywhere of Eric.

I asked Ranny if he was to be one of the yachting party.

"Lord, no!"

Perhaps they had not asked him. Maybe that was it. I said something about how we should miss Hermione.

"Er—yes," he said. "I suppose you will," and I noticed his voice was steadier.

"Don't be ungrateful," I said. "So will you."

"Me?"

Then, as I reproached him, he said: "Oh, yes; awfully nice people the Helmstones. I used to be rather fond of Lady Helmstone. But she's a woman who doesn't know how to take 'No.' That's partly why I came."

I looked back again: "Is that the only reason?"

"Well, she kept writing, and making out, in spite of what I'd said, that she was expecting me to join them at Marseilles. And had put off somebody else who wanted to go. If I backed out—I had never backed in—I would be breaking up the party and behaving like the devil." He spoke more ill-temperedly than I had ever heard him.

"How will it end?" I asked.

"End? I'm hanged if I'll go. I've told her I wouldn't, from the beginning. But I only convinced her yesterday."

We walked on.

"They've asked Betty," I said.

"No!" He caught me up and walked at my side. "When did they do that?"

"Yesterday evening."

"Is Betty going?"

"No," I said.

And very sharp on that: "Why not?" he asked. "Doesn't she want to?"

"She doesn't know anything about it. My

mother doesn't want her to go." And while he fell into silence again, I sent my eyes about the heath. No sign.

Suddenly I remembered Betty's "find out." I had not found out. I hadn't even tried, and I realised myself for a monster of selfishness—thinking Eric, Eric, and nothing but Eric the livelong day.

I pulled myself together and asked Ranny what he had been doing since Christmas.

"Since New Year's Eve, you mean." He frowned, and threw away a cigarette half-smoked, and lit another. When he had puffed and frowned a little more he said he had been going through a ghastly experience with a great friend of his. "Not a bad chap on the whole," he said, in a hesitating, almost appealing voice. But this not bad chap had "got himself badly bunkered." Ranny hesitated, and then: "Yes, I've been thinking I'd tell you about it, and see if—if you thought I've advised him right. . . ." The friend, he said, had been "one of a house party at a place up in Norfolk. He'd gone for the fag end of the shooting. Last month it was. Beastly dull people. Awful good shooting—as a rule. But the weather was rotten. All shut up together in that beastly dull house. Nothing earthly to do, except rag, and—you know the kind of thing."

I didn't know a bit, but I said I did.

"Well, his friend had nothing to do, and he got it into his head that the girl of the house rather liked him. And there wasn't another blessed thing to do, so—— Oh, well, they got engaged."

He waited for a moment, and then he said that when his friend went back to Aldershot he found "he wasn't any more in love with that girl than he was with the cat. It was all just a beastly mistake. So he got leave and went home to think it out. *Couldn't* think it out. Felt he'd better go and talk it over with somebody——" Ranny hesitated again. "Awful hole to be in, isn't it?"

I agreed it must have been very dreadful for his friend to have to tell the girl he'd made a mistake.

"Oh, but he couldn't do *that!*" With a shocked look, Ranny stopped dead for a second. Then, as he went on, he said that he had told his friend of course he'd have to go through with it.

"You don't mean," I said, "that when he was feeling like that you think he ought to let the poor girl marry him!"

He said I didn't see the point. It would probably spoil the girl's life if his friend drew back.

I said he would spoil her life if he didn't draw back.

Ranny looked merely bewildered. "Oh . . . but . . ." then he caught hold of a mainstay, "my friend—he isn't a cad you know. A man *can't* back out of a thing like that."

Then I told him, without the names, about Guy Whitby-Dawson. Guy had "backed out." Guy had made up his mind to the sacrifice of "running in single harness," and had said so, frankly. I praised him.

"Naturally," Ranny answered, "if people hadn't enough money to marry, nobody would expect them to marry. But in the case I'm talking about," he said gloomily, "the man, my friend, is an eldest son. He is going to have—oh, it's rotten luck!"

I asked him if he really thought that not to have enough money to keep house on was worse than not to have enough love to keep house on. He said that what *he* thought wasn't the question.

The question was what the girl would think. And what the girl's family would think. I asked how anybody was to know what the girl would think unless she was asked. Ranny gave his rough head a despairing shake.

Of course I couldn't tell him half of what I felt about that girl, but I kept seeing her. Very happy. Never dreaming what her lover was feeling. I saw them going up the church aisle to be married. All the smiling and congratulating afterwards. I saw them "going away." And I felt sick.

But I did try to make him feel a little for the girl. He said that "feeling for the girl" was precisely what had decided the business. The girl *couldn't* be told the truth.

"She'll guess it!"

But that didn't comfort him as I had expected. "Even if she guesses she couldn't be expected to release—m—my friend."

"Why?"

"Because," said Ranny with his childlike air, "because she'll probably never have as good an offer again."

I was conscious of an inner fury when he said that. I turned on him. And all of a sudden, quite curiously, my feeling changed. His face showed not only utter innocence of any arrogance, the expression on it was of great misery. And this was so at odds with the roundness and the hint of dimples, the roughened hair that the damp air had begun to curl, that as I looked at him, I felt the queer, stirring-at-the-heart sort of softness perhaps only women know, when they catch a glimpse in some man's face of the child that died when he grew up. I could see just what Ranny had been like when he was in short dresses. Full of laughter; as he was still when we first knew him. And in face of those earlier bumps and bruises, just this bewilderment overmastering the pain of the baby who is outraged at the disproportion between desert and reward—the baby who thinks, if he doesn't say: "I never did a single thing, and here all this has tumbled down on my head."

In that instant I saw how lovable Ranny Dallas was, and instead of reproaching him, I found myself saying: "If that's true—what you say—it is very horrible for the girl, but I see it is probably nearly as horrible for the man."

And Ranny sat down on the wet heather under a gorse bush and buried his face in his hands.

"Get up," I said; "here's my handkerchief. Get up quickly. Lady Helmstone is coming."

But who was the man with her?

It was Eric Annan.

CHAPTER XX

TWO INVITATIONS AND A CRISIS

BEFORE those two were visible to the group round Duncombe front door, or within hailing distance of us, they turned into the bypath leading to Big Klaus's.

I could not tell whether Eric had seen us. But I was quite sure Lady Helmstone had. Sure, too, that she had deliberately avoided us.

Ranny didn't want to come back with me, and I didn't press him. I promised him I would say he was going to walk across the heath to the inn —"*had* to get back—expecting a telegram."

I stayed behind in the gorse bushes alone, till I saw Lord Helmstone and all his party going home.

I couldn't bear the thought of meeting Betty. I went round by the kitchen and crept up the back stairs. I listened at my mother's door.

Not a sound. Then I heard Betty downstairs playing the accompaniment to a song she and Ranny used to sing.

So I opened my mother's door and went in.

The first thing she said was, without any preface, "I know, now, why Lady Helmstone invited a child like Bettina to go yachting for six months rather than you."

"So do I," I answered; "they all adore Bettina. And then she is Hermione's special friend."

"There is another reason," my mother said, looking out of the window. "A reason that concerns—Lady Barbara." Then she glanced at me, a little shyly, and away her eyes went again to the window. "Lord Helmstone thinks a sea-voyage would be the best thing in the world for Mr. Annan. They are asking him to be one of the party."

I felt as if some hard substance had struck me violently in the face. But I managed to bring out the words: "Is he going, do you think?"

"No doubt he will go," she said.

* * * * *

Already I seemed to have lost him as utterly as though he had died. Yet with none of that sad comfort my mother had spoken of—the comfort of knowing one's possession safe beyond all risk of loss or tarnishing.

I had never been on a yacht.

I had never seen a yacht.

Yet I could see Eric on the *Nautch Girl.* And Lady Barbara!

Her mother's words came back: "Very little is done at balls." Very much, the story-books had told me, was done by throwing people together on a long voyage. My own heart told me the same.

Yes, I had lost him.

And I had lost myself.

* * * * *

The next day was Sunday. In the morning Hermione came to carry Bettina off for their last day together. I had to promise that, if Ranny should come to Duncombe, I would send for Betty.

As I sat with my mother, that same afternoon, the door opened, and there was the maid bringing in Mr. Annan.

I think I scarcely spoke or moved.

It was my mother who said: "I thought you would come to say good-bye."

"'Good-bye'?" Then, with unusual *brus-*

querie where my mother was concerned, he added: "When *I* come to see people, what I say is, 'How do you do?'"

"But aren't you going away to-morrow?"

"Why should I?"

"Why, to catch the *Nautch Girl.*"

"I can't think of a girl I should so little care to catch."

And he wasn't going at all! Had never contemplated it for a moment!

The weight of the world fell off my shoulders. And for nearly five minutes of a joy almost too great to be borne, I believed that it was because of me he wasn't going.

Then he told my mother it was because of his work. And so it was that, unconsciously, he made good the excuse I had offered for his bolting off the afternoon I told him my secret. He seemed to have forgotten that episode. At least, he behaved as though it had never happened.

He laughed a little over his interview with her ladyship. "Very determined individual, Lady Helmstone." He had told her, finally, that he hadn't time even to go to his sister's wedding. He had not thought it necessary, he said to add that he wouldn't have gone to his sister's wedding however much time he had.

Of course, my mother asked why such unbrotherly behaviour? He told us that he didn't approve of the marriage. There was nothing against the man's character. He was a "Writer to the Signet," which seemed in Scotland to mean a sort of barrister. I said "Writer to the Signet" sounded much finer than "barrister." I was told that Maggie Annan could not be expected to live on a fine sound. And that was about all they would have. This particular "Writer to the Signet" was poor. "Oh, poorer than poor!"

I didn't like his way of saying that.

As we went downstairs I was rather glad of being able to disagree with him about something. It would keep me from being foolish. I had that feeling of the creature who has been straining long at bonds, and finds the sudden loosing a test of equilibrium. For fear I should seem too gloriously content with him, I taxed Eric with thinking over much about money. He said a man may put up with any sort of hardship he likes for himself. But no man had a right to marry till he could support a wife in some sort of comfort. I suggested that perhaps Maggie Annan cared less about comfort than she cared about other things. He retorted that Maggie probably hadn't thought it out at all. She was acting on impulse. "To think it out—that was the man's business." And so on.

I felt myself growing impatient when he said "comfort" for the second time.

"When people are old, yes! 'Comfort' then. But when they're young, what *does* it matter?"

He leaned against the newel of the staircase and looked at me, quite surprised. "I thought you were more practical," he said.

"I *am* practical. That's why I say comfort is wasted on the young. They don't even want it—unless they're rather horrid sort of young people."

"Thank you," he said, laughing, and I felt hot. I tried to explain. Such a lot of things were fun when you were young, especially when they were shared. I had noticed that. Things that made you cross, and made you ill when you were older—— Suddenly I stopped, saying in my heart: "Heavens! isn't this the kind of foolishness I was hoping to be saved from? Or is it worse? . . ." For Eric was smiling in such a disconcerting way.

I said primly that Miss Maggie did not need me to defend her, and that I must not keep him from his work.

That word was like the touch of a whip. In two seconds he was gone.

The next day, Monday, just the same. He ran in only for a moment to see my mother. He could not sit down; he could not do this, nor that. Work, work! It had seized him in a fresh grip.

I was thankful to the work for having carried him away that Monday afternoon, when Betty came back from seeing the Helmstones off. It was a Betty we had never seen before. I don't know what else Hermione had said to her, but Betty had been told that she, too, might have gone yachting.

It was like a stab to see my mother's face now, and to remember the confidence with which she had quoted the old story about Bettina's insisting on the promise that she should not be made to pay visits: "Not *never?*" "Not never!"

I had hated Lady Helmstone for saying that Bettina would, in her ladyship's opinion, be found to have outgrown her reluctance.

It was true.

Bettina wanted to go!

My mother, unwisely I felt, reminded Betty of the old pledge.

"I was a baby then. What did I know?"

And now there were tears in Bettina's eyes because she was *not* going to leave her mother.

* * * * *

I don't like to think of those next days. They were all a strain and a tangle.

I cannot imagine what we should have done without Eric. For the way Bettina took her disappointment made my mother positively ill. Eric's prescription was hard to fill: "Peace of mind—absolute quiet and tranquillity."

"You are less alarmed," he said in that direct way of his, "than you were that first day you brought me here. But you have more reason."

* * * * *

I did not want Bettina fully to realise the cloud that was so surely gathering to burst—and yet I was angry at her failure to realise. So unreasonable, so unkind I found I could be! Oh, I lost patience more than once. But my mother, never.

"You will see all the beautiful places some day, my darling."

Bettina was sure she never should. This had been her one chance—who else was likely to take her?

"The fit and proper person. Your husband will take you, as your father took me."

That answer surprised us both.

I could not blame Bettina for feeling that it seemed to postpone the delights of travel overlong.

The strange new Bettina went about the house, settling to nothing, at once restive and idle. All on edge. The worst sign of all was that she neglected her music. My mother remonstrated.

"What's the use?"

"You will find your music a very important part of your equipment."

"Equipment!" said the new Bettina scornfully. "Equipment for what?"

"For taking your place in the world."

"The world!" Bettina exchanged looks with me. Yes, the world seemed far away. Inaccessible.

"If we never go anywhere—never see anyone, what is the use in being equipped?"

I think Bettina was sorry she said that. The effect of it was as though some rude hand had thrown down a screen. My mother looking up with hollow, startled eyes must have caught a glimpse of something that she dreaded.

* * * * *

"Don't put it off," she whispered. "Write to your Aunt Josephine to-night."

I composed my letter very carefully.

My sister and I had often wished, I wrote, that we had some acquaintance with our only relation. Especially as she and our father had been so much to each other. Our mother was in poor health. We lived very quietly. But we all hoped if ever Aunt Josephine came to this part of the world—a very pretty part—she would come to see us. I was nearly nineteen now, and I was hers "affectionately."

Feeling myself very diplomatic and "deep," I enclosed the last photograph Hermione had taken of Bettina. I wrote on it "Betty at sixteen—but it does not do her justice."

If anything could win her over, it would be that snapshot of Betty dancing on Duncombe lawn.

I posted the letter in an access of remorse and wretchedness—afraid I had left it too late. For my mother had said, "After all, instead of your leaving me, I shall have to leave you."

That same night Eric told me that he had sent to London for a heart-specialist. And the heart-specialist had answered he would be down on Thursday, which was the day after to-morrow. I saw in Eric's face that he was anxious at the delay. He admitted that he was "afraid" to wait. Yes, he would wire for another man.

Eric—"afraid"!

"You don't," I whispered, "you don't mean . . . quite soon?"

He repeated that he was "afraid."

Then I felt I knew all that any specialist could tell me.

* * * * *

That was the day I came to know the steadying influence of a call to face great issues. They bring their own greatness with them. They wrap it round our littleness. Only afterwards, thinking how gentle and watchful Eric looked in telling me, I remembered that people were supposed to faint when they heard news like that. For myself I had never felt so clear-headed. Never felt the responsibility of life so great. Never felt that for us to fail in bearing our share was so unthinkable.

If this Majesty of Death were soon to clothe my mother, her children must not hide and weep. They must help her, help each other to meet the Great King at the gate.

All the little troubles fell away. I was kind again to Betty.

I called my lover "Eric." He called me by my name. Just that.

No more passed between him and me. But I felt I had taken this man and that he had taken this woman "for better or worse."

CHAPTER XXI

AUNT JOSEPHINE'S LETTER

Bettina came into the room and handed me a letter.

"Mrs. Harborough!"—my mother drew herself up on the pillow with an animation I had not thought to see again.

I opened and read: "My dear niece——"

"Ah!" my mother brought out the ejaculation with an effect of having doubted if the relationship would be owned.

That introductory phrase turned out to be the most comprehensible part of the first half of Aunt Josephine's letter. As for me, I was completely floored by "the Dynamism of Mind," after I had stumbled over a cryptic reference to my mother's state—"which you must not expect me to call sickness. There is no such thing. There is only harmony or unharmony, whether of the so-called body or the soul."

On the third page, the writer descended

from these Alpine heights, to say that it had been "inspirationally borne in upon" her that the time was come for her brother's daughters to widen their horizon, and incidentally, to see something of their father's world.

The implied slur upon our mother's world was, to my surprise, not resented.

"Go on. Go on."

The letter ended by saying that, in spite of very grave and urgent preoccupations, Aunt Josephine would endeavour to draw a little of the old life round her, if her nieces would come and stay with her in Lowndes Square for a few weeks.

"A London season!" Bettina cried.

I looked up from the letter and saw my mother watching with hungry delight Bettina's face of rapture. Bettina had not looked like that since the Helmstones went away.

But the most marked change, after all, was in my mother herself.

When Eric came he was staggered. "I'll believe in miracles after this!"—and we joked about the Dynamism of Mind.

My mother had taken for granted that both Bettina and I would accept Aunt Josephine's invitation, though I said at once *I* could not leave home. My mother put this aside with: "Bettina go alone! A wild idea."

When the question came up again in Eric's presence I did not press it far. But, going downstairs, I asked him how *was* I to put it to my mother?

"Put what?" he asked.

"Why, the fact that we can't leave her. Or, at least, that I can't." I agreed Betty must go.

"So must you," he said. My heart beat faster. His villeggiatura was near the end. London, for me, meant Eric. "You need the change," he said, "more than Betty does."

"You forget," I said, a little sadly, "what we've been facing here. The specialist coming——"

"Well, he will find she has rallied."

Nevertheless, she was in no condition, Eric said, to be crossed. Had she not told me herself that my first duty was to take care of Betty? That was not how he would put it—all the same, the change would do me good. Then a word about our "trustworthy servants." In any event I was not to say any more about not going, till we had seen the "London chap."

* * * * *

She went on quite wonderfully.

We were positively gay again—she and I and Bettina—the three of us laying plans.

We talked about clothes, and planned how we should look very nice on very little money.

When the great specialist came, he found my mother sitting up in a bed covered with old evening-gowns, old laces, and embroidered muslins; things she had worn long ago in India, and which should help to make us brave for our first London season. Smart little blouses, morning-gowns and afternoon-gowns, could be made in the house or in the village. But who was worthy to make an evening-frock fit for London? My mother was much more concerned about this than about the great specialist, whom she received rather as a friend of Eric's. He echoed all that Eric had said.

* * * * *

My mother had made me write to Aunt Josephine on the evening of the same day that brought her letter. I did not tell anyone, but I put off posting my answer till the London doctor had gone.

My letter was not only thanks and acceptance. I felt I ought, in common civility, to try to make some more or less intelligent rejoinder to the odd part of my aunt's letter. And this modest effort seemed not to displease her. For she replied in eight pages of cloudy metaphysic and a highly lucid cheque. The cheque alone supported us in our attempt to grapple with those eight bewildering pages. The first introduced us, by way of the Psychology of the Solar Plexus, to the Self-Superlative:

> "If this view-point interests you, I will later explain to you—in terms of inclusiveness and totalism—the mystical activities of the Ever-Creative Self."

"Isn't she awfully learned!" said Bettina in a scared voice.

> "On your return home, having 'contacted,' as we say, the talents and the tranquillity of others—instead of contacting things of lack and fear—you will be able to think happily and sweetly about matters that formerly disturbed you. All the ills of life are curable from within. Complete health is wisdom. I do not go so far as to predict

that you will find yourself instantly able to adopt the bio-vibratory sympathism which habitualises thought to the Majesty of Choice. But I *do* say that after giving the deeper and sweeter Self a chance to unite the self of common consciousness, constructively, with the Powers Within, that you, too, may find yourself a Healer—that is, Harmoniser—clothed in the Regal Now."

After that plunge, Aunt Josephine came to the surface for breath, so to speak, and to say that she thought it only fair to tell us that she herself had seen almost nothing of general society for the past ten years. She had her work. She had her classes in which we might take some interest. I was to tell " the musical one " that Self-Expression, through voice-culture and pianoforte playing, was one of the Keys to the Biosophian System.

Aunt Josephine had already taken opera-tickets for the season. And we should go to as many concerts as we liked. We should see pictures and we should see people. We should " learn to use the plus sign in thought." We should " recognise the cosmic truth that ALL IS GOOD."

This concluding phrase was underscored three times. And still, despite its provokingly obvious aspect, I felt that I had not a notion what Aunt

Josephine meant by it. My mother said the reason was that I knew nothing of mysticism. Eric said neither did he. But he knew stark, staring lunacy when he saw it. And he was more than doubtful if we ought to be entrusted to this demented step-aunt.

My mother reproved Eric's flippancy. Either she really did see daylight, and most excellent meaning, in the Biosophical Theory, or she concerned herself to make out a case for the defence of Aunt Josephine. She told Eric she was surprised that a man of science should at this time of the day cast ridicule on the doctrine of an essential harmony between "soul states" and the health of the body. For her part, she felt the attraction of this idea of ceasing the little lonely personal fight against overwhelming odds—this putting oneself into direct relation with the Infinite.

Eric stared.

Yes, my mother maintained, there was much to be said for Mrs. Harborough's idea that each individual should learn to think of his life in connection with this underlying force. If, instead of denying God we affirmed Him . . . refusing to accept or to believe in evil——

"All very jolly for us," Eric said, "but what about the poor cancerous devils in our hospital? I see us looking in on them and saying: 'Oh, you're all right! Three cheers for harmony. Come out and play golf with the staff.'"

* * * * *

After Eric had gone my mother lay back on the pillow, her shining eyes on Bettina pirouetting noiselessly about the room. I begged Bettina to stop her gyrating.

She explained she was doing the cheque dance. Mercifully there was this antidote—I mean postscript to Aunt Josephine's letter. "Nearer the time" she would send us the money for our tickets. The enclosed £40 was for clothes.

Now the way was clear!

No.

The question still was, Who, this side of London, could be trusted to make our frocks? The seriousness of the consideration brought the cheque dance to an end. We sat and thought.

The precise date of this visit was not yet fixed. Aunt Josephine had asked what time would suit us best.

With one voice, Betty and I cried, *"June!"*

But we were promptly told (and we agreed) that to suggest June would be too grasping. Aunt Josephine would have other, more important, guests eager to come to her for the Coronation month. So we answered: Any time convenient to her.

Then that admirable Aunt wrote back: "Would next month do?" And would we stay for the Coronation?

In spite of the breathless shortness of the time of preparation, Bettina composed Coronation dances and practised curtseying to the Queen, though she knew quite well that she would only see Her Majesty at a distance driving by in her golden coach.

The one consideration that sobered Bettina was who, *who*—on this short notice, with all the feminine world crying passionately for frocks—who could be found to make ours? The more plain and simple, the more important was style and cut. Nobody in the country-side was competent for such an undertaking.

Brighton? Very dear, and not first-rate.

Suddenly Bettina clapped her hands.

"The little French dressmaker Hermione told us about."

The very person! Only, wouldn't she be up to the eyes in work? We remembered, too, she was said to be "not strong." She didn't care, as a rule, to work out of London. But she had come to sew for those horrid people Lord Helmstone let the Pond House to the year before. The people turned out to be badly off, and, after doing some damage, they had gone away without paying their rent. A law-suit was pending between them and Lord Helmstone. We had never known them, but we could not help noticing their clothes. They were beautiful. Even my mother said so.

Hermione had played golf once or twice with the boy and girl. One day she had admired openly something the girl was wearing.

"Yes, looks quite Bond Street, doesn't it?" the girl said. "And all done at home by a little dressmaker at four-and-six a day."

Hermione had got the woman's address, specially for us, she said—meaning for Bettina. Hermione was always advising Bettina about her clothes and making the child discontented with what she had.

We had not wanted any "little tame dressmaker" at the time, but we were enchanted now, when Bettina turned up the card inscribed:

"MADAME AURORE,
"87, Crutchley Street,
"Leicester Square."

"Madame Aurore!" my mother echoed. "No doubt a cockney of the cockneys!"

* * * * *

She was not a cockney. And she was a great surprise.

CHAPTER XXII

PLANTING THYME

THE morning she came was the morning Eric said good-bye " just for a few days," he dreaming, as little as we, of what those few days were to bring.

And so, ignorant of what I was facing, I was almost happy in spite of the parting, because of what Eric said to me that last Monday morning.

The cart had been ordered to go for Madame Aurore at 9:42. Directly after breakfast my mother and Bettina set about trimming hats—a business in which they scorned my help. I had something particular to finish in the garden. I went on digging up the bare patches on the south bank, sharing the delight of all things growing and blowing and flying under the glorious cloud-piled sky of May. I listened intently, as I worked, to that orchestra of tiny sound underneath the loud birds' singing. The spring, unlike last year's, had been cold and late; many days like this—with crisp air and fitful sunshine. Only here, in the sheltered south-west corner, were the bees in any number tuning up their fiddles.

I looked up from my work and saw—at that most unusual hour—Eric Annan at the gate! I saw, too, that he looked odd—excited. I dropped the garden-fork. " What is the matter ? " I said.

" Matter ? What should be the matter ? "

I only smiled. It was so like Eric not to be pleased at hearing he had betrayed himself.

" I thought you looked as if—as if something had happened," I said. What I meant was, as if something were about to happen. Only one thing, I thought, could make Eric look like that; make him interrupt his precious morning; one thing, alone, could have grown so great overnight that the heart of man could not conceal it, or contain it, for another hour.

But, even if my hopes were not misleading me, I felt that Eric would not like my having guessed so much. To hide my eyes from him I bent down over my basket. I lifted out tufts of aromatic green, and set them firmly in the loosened soil. I pressed the earth down tight about their roots.

" What are you planting there ? " he asked.

" Re-planting the wild thyme," I said. Something had killed it last year.

"Where do you find wild thyme?" he asked.

I told him how far I had to go for it. And when? Before breakfast! He looked astonished.

I did not like to explain that I had got into the habit of waking early to study. And, now that studying was no use, I spent the time in taking delicious walks in the early morning, before other people were awake. I confessed the walks.

"You ought not to have told me," he said.

"Why?"

"Because, for these next days, I can't come too."

I went on planting thyme.

"Promise me, for these next days *you* won't go either."

"Why?" I asked again.

"Because my thoughts might go wandering."

I nudged the wild thyme, and we both smiled secretly.

"I can't afford, just at this moment, to have anything distracting me." He said this in an anxious, almost appealing, way.

"Very well," I answered. "I won't go early walks for the next—how many days am I to be cooped up when the morning is at its best?"

"Oh, not long." Then with that impatience of his, if you were doing other things while he was there: "How much more of that stuff are you going to put in?"

"All there is," I said provokingly. And I did not hurry.

"Why must you have wild thyme there?" he grumbled.

"So as not to disappoint the blue butterflies," I said gravely. "They 'know a bank' and this is it. They've had an understanding with my mother about it for years. If they don't find thyme here they're annoyed. They go on dying out. My mother says a world without blue butterflies would be a poor sort of place."

We talked irrelevancies for a moment more—the passion of the convolvulus moth for petunias, and the other flowers the different sorts of moths and butterflies preferred.

He was surprised to hear that for years my mother had taken all that trouble to please even the ordinary red admirals and spotted footmen and painted ladies. I explained that I was replanting this thyme only to please my mother.

"Personally," I had never bothered much about the butterfly-garden, I said, in what he promptly called a superior tone.

I maintained that the pampered creatures were dreadful "slackers" and sybarites—all for colour and sweet scents.

He stood listening a moment to the bees' band playing in the rhododendron concert, and then he defended the butterflies. Butterflies were much misunderstood. "In their way—and a very good way, too—they answer to the call."

"What call?"

"The call to serve the ends of life."

I looked up, surprised, from my fresh thyme patch, for general moralisings were not much in Eric's way. "What are the ends of life?"

"More life." There was a moment's pause. Then he said butterflies were no more "idle" than bees and birds. Besides attending to their more immediate affairs they were pollen-bringers.

It was such solemn talk for butterflies. I told him the two sulphur yellows reeling in the sunshine were laughing at him. "'Ends of life' indeed! They simply *love* bright colour and things that smell sweet. . . ."

"Of course they love them!" Then he said something that sank deeper than any single sentence I ever heard: "Hating never created anything; all life comes from lovers."

At the moment that great saying only frightened me. And the strange thing was it seemed to frighten him.

We were very still for a moment. I thought even the little music of the honey bees had slackened. I and all the world waited—holding breath.

Then a gust of wind veered round the corner, and Eric turned up his collar. He asked if I wasn't cold. I was anything but cold. But I had noticed that after his long hours of motionless concentration indoors, Eric was very sensitive to chill. So I put off planting the rest of the thyme, and I took Eric up to the morning-room.

"What is he going to tell me?" I asked myself on the way. And though I asked, I thought I knew.

CHAPTER XXIII

ERIC'S SECRET

My sister and I breakfasted in the morning-room in those days, and we always had a fire for Bettina's sake on chilly mornings.

In the back of my mind I was hoping Eric's complaint of cold was an excuse. If my first impression had been right, if he had something to tell me, he would tell it better indoors. I should hear it better, sitting beside him.

The pang when he passed the sofa by! I was wrong. . . . I was an idiot. . . .

He drew up before the ungenerous little fire and began at once to speak with suppressed excitement of a " secret."

"——the sort of thing that—well, I wouldn't trust my own brother with it." And upon that he stopped short.

I did not say: " You can trust me." But I hardly breathed in the pause. I felt it all hung on whether he told me. What hung? Why, everything—whether life was going to be kind to me some day . . . whether it was well or ill that I had been born.

He seemed to be content with having told me there was a secret. For he changed the subject abruptly to the Bungalow, and what an adept Bootle was at inoculation and the preparation of cultures. Bootle possessed the great and glorious faculty of accuracy! One of the few men on earth whose account of a thing did not need to be checked.

Sitting over the fire that morning, Eric told me that the Bungalow was a laboratory. Very important work had been done there last autumn. (So *that* was why he had stayed on!) "Tentative but highly significant results" had been arrived at —results which all these months of contest and putting to proof, in London and on the Continent, had not been able to upset.

"Gods!" Eric exclaimed, with a startling vehemence. But this was a glorious place to work in! The best air in England! And the Bungalow had been an inspiration from on high! Far away from noise and interruption; and not merely for a few paltry hours. Great stretches of time to himself! Then you were so fit here.

You slept. You had all your wits about you. As we knew, it was Hawkins's idea in the first place—that Eric should come down and rest. Well, now I was to hear something more about Hawkins. Hawkins was a kind of mascot. He not only was the best man they'd ever had in that chair at the University. He wasn't only a first-rate bacteriologist, and first-rate all-round man. There was something about Hawkins that struck fire out of other people. His rooms were a meeting-place for chaps keen about—well, about the things that matter. Hawkins gave a dinner at his club one night to some London University men and a couple of distinguished foreigners.

"Of course, we talked shop. We argued and stirred one another up, and the sparks flew. When the rest had gone Hawkins and I stayed talking in the smoking-room. About an idea"—Eric looked round to see that the door was shut—"a new idea I was working at for dealing with cancer."

"Dealing!" I echoed, leaning forward. "You mean curing?"

"——I told Hawkins about an experiment I'd been making. As I've said, Hawkins is very intelligent. But he contested my conclusions. I grew hot. We argued. I told him more and more. Hawkins thought my experiments too rough-and-ready. Even if they weren't rough-and-ready, to be conclusive they must be tried on an extended scale. I stood up for the validity of tests, on a small scale, done with an infinity of care—a ruthless spending of the investigator rather than multiplication of the subject. All the same, I couldn't deny that precious time was being wasted and many lives. Hawkins was right. I did need a trained staff, and I needed—oh, masses of things I had not got, and had no prospect of getting. We had tried the forlorn hope of a Government grant—and failed. We agreed that, in working out an idea like mine, the crucial danger lay in premature publicity. We are in a cleft stick in these matters. Without the right people knowing, believing, helping, it is hard—pretty nearly impossible—to go forward. I sat, rather dejected, and stared at the fire. The smoking-room had been empty except for a little, dried-up old man, who was half asleep over the evening papers. A few minutes after Hawkins had gone out to pay his bill, the little old man waked up and went to a writing-table. In a half-minute or so I looked round, and he was standing quite near me, warming his back at the fire.

"'I've been eavesdropping,' he said. Lord! I was scared. How much had I given away? 'I don't know anything about this subject,' he said. 'But I've an idea you do. Anyhow, I'm willing to gamble on it. My name's Pearmain,' he said, and he showed me the signature on a cheque. 'A thousand pounds to start you.' He laid the cheque down on the little table among the matches and cigar-ends. 'You can let me know when you need more,' he said. He fished a card out of an inside pocket, and chucked it on top of the cheque. Naturally I was staggered. He *seemed* right enough in his head, but I was sure he couldn't be. . . . When Hawkins came back I introduced him. We talked awhile longer. Then the old man said good-night. The next day I cashed the cheque. I gave up my post in the hospital, and I gave up . . . a lot of things. After that I invested every ounce of energy I had in this undertaking. For three solid years I've done nothing, thought about nothing, except the one thing."

His eyes were shining as a lover's might, I thought. The sting of jealousy poisoned my pleasure in being taken into his confidence—a renewed antagonism to the work, work, always work, that made its triumphant claim.

"You pretend to be more inhuman than you are," I said. "For you don't forget that you can help people who have only ordinary everyday troubles."

"Oh, yes, I do," he laughed. "I'll have nothing to do with ordinary, everyday troubles."

"You helped us——"

"Oh, that's different—an exception. Just for once. . . ." He seemed to excuse himself, for wasting time on us. He said the most extravagant things. "A revolution might have swept England. I should have gone on attenuating serums and inoculating guinea-pigs."

It may have been something in my manner, or just my silence, that pulled him up. He spoke of the share we at Duncombe had had in "what's happened."

"When I was clean worked out and dead-beat, I came here."

We hadn't any notion of the "rest and refreshment—the——" He looked at me out of those clear red-brown eyes of his, and seemed to deliberate.

A sense of delicious panic seized me. "And—the—the experiments. How do they come on?" I asked, but I wasn't thinking of them at all.

"That," he said, sinking his voice—"that's just what I'm coming to; though I hoped I shouldn't tell you. I didn't mean to say anything at all this morning, except that I was going to be a hermit for these next days. But you aren't a chatterbox. The fact is . . . last night I believe I stumbled on the secret."

I don't know what I said, but it pleased him. His eyes were full of gentle brilliancy. "Yes, yes," he said. "I knew *you'd* understand."

Oh, it was good to see him with that light in his face!

And we sat there, with the morning sun shining over us, and just looked gladness at each other. Then I said I thought he must be the happiest man in England.

He half put out his hand, and drew it back. "I am to find that out, too, very soon," he said.

The clock downstairs chimed ten. Eric jumped up like a person with a train to catch.

He had taken me into his counsels prematurely like this, he said, because he wanted to feel sure that I wasn't putting any wrong construction on the fact of his burying himself for these next days. " I like to think you are understanding. If I have any good news, I'll come and tell you. If you don't hear, you'll know I don't dare let go my clue even for an hour, except to sleep."

And now he must go.

I went with him as far as the gate.

He walked with head bent, and eyes that saw things hidden from me. Already he was back in the Bungalow.

I felt the misery of being deserted. But I felt, too, the strong intelligence, the iron purpose, in the man. And though I was torn and aching, I was proud. For all my jealousy, as I saw the mouth so firm-set under the red-brown thatch, saw the colour in his face, something reached me, too, of the heat of this passion to find out—something of the absorption of the man of science in his task. Here was the new kind of soldier going to his post.

I held out my hand. "Good luck!"

He took it, then dropped it quickly.

And quickly, without once looking back, he walked away.

I watched him hurrying across the links till one of the heath hollows swallowed him up.

As I turned to go back to my thyme-planting, I heard the dog-cart rattling along the stony road.

Madame Aurore!

I never finished planting the thyme.

CHAPTER XXIV

MADAME AURORE

Madame Aurore was little and wasted and shrill.

She had deep scars in her neck, and dead-looking yellow hair.

She was drenched in cheap scent.

Her untidy, helter-skelter dress gave no hint of the admirable taste she lavished upon others.

She saw at once what we ought to have, and she talked about our clothes with an enthusiasm as great as Betty's own.

" Ah, but *Madame!* " she remonstrated dramatically, when my mother showed her the new white satin, which was for me, and a creamy lace gown which was to be modernised for Bettina—" not *bōt* vhite ! "

My mother explained that my gown was to have rose-coloured garnishing.

" Mais non ! mais *non!* " Madame must pardon her for the liberty, but she, Madame Aurore, could not bring herself to see our chief advantage thrown away.

What, then, was our chief advantage? Betty demanded.

What indeed, but the contrast between us. The moment she laid eyes on the hair of Mademoiselle Bettina she had said to herself: the frock of Mademoiselle Bettina should be that tender green of tilleul—with just a note of bleu de ciel. Oh, a dress of spring-time—an April dress, a gay little dress, for all its tenderness! A dress to make happy the heart of all who look thereon.

But "green!" We had sent all the way to London for the white satin, and we had no green.

Then 'twas in truth une bonne chance that Madame Aurore *had!* She often bought up bargains and gave her clients an opportunity to acquire them. She rushed out of the room, and returned with a piece of silk chiffon of the most adorable hue. She showed us the effect over white satin. My satin. But then, as Madame Aurore said, we could so easily send to Stagg and Mantle's for more.

She looked at me out of snapping black eyes—eyes like animated boot-buttons. "Yes, yes; for you, Mademoiselle, ze note sall be sérénité . . . hein? Zis priceless old lace over ivory satin.

Ah . . ." She struck an attitude. "I *see* it. So . . . and so. A ceinture panne, couleur de feuille d'automme touched with gold broderie. Hein? Oh, very distingué, hein?"

"It must not be expensive"; we had to say that to Madame Aurore all that first day, at regular intervals. But she had her way. She sewed hard, and she chattered as hard as she sewed.

Bettina ran across her in the passage that first evening as Madame Aurore came up from supper. And they began instantly on the fruitful theme of "green gown." My mother called out to Bettina that she had talked enough about clothes for one day, and in any case she had left us to go early to bed. Bettina regretted her rash promise —wasn't the least tired, and could have talked clothes till cock-crow! There was some argument on this head at the door, in which Madame Aurore joined, with too great a freedom, and an elaborate air of ranging herself on my mother's side. This pleased, least of all, the person Madame Aurore designed to propitiate.

Madame Aurore, I am sure, had not been in the house an hour before she had taken the measure of our main preoccupation. Mademoiselle Bettina ought to be grateful, she said, to have a mother so devoted, so solicitous. Standing near the open door, she piled up an exaggerated case of maternal love. There was nothing in life like the love between mother and child. Ah, didn't she know! Her own little girl——

My mother said she must have the door shut now, and I was sent to undo Betty's gown.

Bettina thought it angelic of Madame Aurore not to resent our mother's lack of interest in the small Aurore. According to Bettina, Madame showed a wonderfully nice disposition in not withdrawing her interest from us after that. She seemed rather to imply: very well, you don't care about my child . . . but I am still ready to care about yours.

"Parfaitement!" . . . the little dressmaker remembered Bettina's passing Drew Pond House the summer before. It was true what Hermione had reported. Madame Aurore had leaned out of the window to watch Bettina. She had even expressed the wish that she might have the dressing of cette jolie enfant.

Oh, but life was a droll affair!

Bettina thought it entirely delightful. She went about the house singing. The first time Madame Aurore heard Bettina she arrested the rapid stab of her basting needle: "Who ees dat?"

"That is my youngest daughter."

"She tink to go on ze stage?"

"Oh, no."

"Not? It ess a vast, zat."

* * * * *

She was always cold.

Whenever we were out of the morning-room she piled on the coal. On the second day I remonstrated. Fuel, I explained, was very expensive so far from the coal-fields. She smiled. "You are ze careful one, hein?" and she looked at me in a way which made me uncomfortable.

But I did not feel about the poor little creature as my mother did.

My mother went so far as to wish we had not sent for her. She would never have allowed her to come if she had seen her first. I thought my mother severe.

Everybody else, including the servants, liked Madame Aurore. No wonder. She spent her life doing things for people. Sewing for us all day like mad, so that our two best frocks might be finished in spite of the shortness of the time; and still ready at nightfall to show the cook how to make p'tite marmite, or sauce à la financière—equally ready to advise the housemaid how to give the Bond Street, not to say the Rue de la Paix, touch to her Sunday alpaca, and chic to old Ransom's beehive hat.

If she asked them one and all more questions in a minute than they could answer in a month, what did that show but the generous interest she took in her fellow-beings?

Bettina, with her little air of large experience, said that Madame Aurore was the most "sympathetic" person she had ever met. Madame Aurore's benevolent concern about our clothes, our soups, sauces, and servants, and everything that was ours, extended to our friends and relations and everything that was theirs. She had never, she said, known people—let alone such charming people as we—with so few acquaintances. Bettina thought Madame Aurore was sorry for us.

She asked a great deal about the Helmstones. "Ze only friends and zey are avay for seex mont!" Ah, it was well we were going to London. We should die, else, of aloneness. Aunt Josephine plainly was the one ray of light in our grey existence. Where did she live? Lowndes Square! Ah, but a very expensive and splendid part of London! No news to us, who had our own private measure for social altitudes. Bettina had looked out Lowndes Square on our faded map of London. Aunt Josephine was only a private person, but she lived nearer the King and Queen than the Helmstones did.

And for all her being a Biosophist she had asked us to stay for the Coronation. Bettina frequently led the conversation to the great event of June. But this queer little Frenchwoman was more interested in Aunt Josephine than she was in the King and Queen. Here was distinction for an Aunt!

And what was she like—this lady? We must have a picture of our only and so valuable relation.

Bettina went and rooted about in the deep print and photograph drawer, till she brought Aunt Josephine to light. Very faded and old-fashioned looking, but Madame Aurore regarded the face with a respectful enthusiasm. "Oh, une grande dame! une vraie grande dame!" Madame Aurore understood better now what was required.

We repudiated, on our aunt's behalf, the idea that she was so much grande dame as philanthropist, thinker, recluse. We did not deny her grandeur. We but clarified it; or, at least, Bettina did.

"Bettina talks too much to that woman," my mother said to me privately. She sent for Bettina and told her she was not to speak to Madame Aurore about anything except her work.

Bettina thought to interpret this order literally would be inhuman. Besides, she considered it very nice of Madame Aurore to take such an interest in us. "*I* am grateful when people take an interest," said Bettina with her air of superiority.

When my mother heard that Bettina had been discussing Aunt Josephine, and had unearthed the photograph to show to Madame Aurore, she was annoyed. "Go and bring me the picture," she said.

Bettina went into the morning-room, and looked about for some minutes. The little dressmaker sat there, in a litter of white and green, sewing furiously. Bettina said at last that she hated most dreadfully to bother Madame Aurore, but where was that old photograph?

Madame Aurore looked up absently. "Had Mademoiselle Bettina not taken it out?"

"Perhaps I did——" Bettina scoured the house.

Aunt Josephine's photograph was never found.

* * * * *

I was glad our mother did not know that Bettina had told Madame Aurore about the pendant and the diamond star. Bettina excused herself by saying Madame Aurore had been so certain a lady like our mother must have jewels, and that she would lend them to her daughters, in order to put the finishing touch of elegance to our toilette. Betty had felt it due to our mother to acknowledge that a part, at least, of this exalted expectation was not so wide of the mark. And Bettina endorsed Madame Aurore's opinion that a diamond star certainly *would* "light up" my ivory satin and old lace. Also—but no, we must do without.

* * * * *

The green frock was all but finished. We had brought the cheval glass out of my mother's room. She was "not strong enough to stand the patchouli," so she missed the great moment of the final trying on. Bettina stood before the glass, looking somehow more childish than ever, or rather seeming less of common earth and more of fairyland, in the tunic-frock of green, her short curls on her neck.

My fancy that she was like somebody out of "The Midsummer Night's Dream," was set to flight by Madame Aurore's shower of couturière's compliment, mixed with highly practical considerations, such as: "See how it falls when you sit down. Parfaitement! And can you valk in it? But *wis grace!*" Bettina proved she could. "A merveille! Sapristi! Mademoiselle Bettine would see the sensation she was going to create in London. Could she lift ze arm—hein?" Mais belle comme un ange!—many makers of quite beautiful gowns studied the effect seulement en repos. Mademoiselle Bettine would, without doubt, dance in that frock. Let us see, did it lend itself? Bettina moved about the morning-room to waltz time—laughing at and with Madame Aurore; stopping to make court curtsies;

watching in the glass if green frock had pretty manners.

One thing more, its maker said, and behold Perfection! It needed . . . it cried aloud for a single jewel.

" Ah, yes." Bettina's look fell. No doubt the finishing touch would have been a pearl and emerald pendant. But——

Madame Aurore struck in with a torrential rapture, drowning explanation and regret. Life, Madame Aurore shrilled, was for ever using her, humble instrument though she was—for the working out of these benevolences. There had she—but three days ago—all innocent, unknowing—tossed that piece of chiffon tilleul into her trunk. Or rather, not her hand performed the act—not hers at all. The hand of Fate! And now, *The Finger!* . . . pointing straight at the pearl and emerald pendant. But, instantly, must Mademoiselle Bettine go and get the ravishing jewel—the diamond star, as well, while she was about it.

Then poor Betty had to say these glories were no more.

Madame Aurore snapped her boot-button eyes, and rolled them up. Our poor, *poor* mother!

Deeply, ah! but profoundly, Madame Aurore commiserated une dame si distinguée, si élégante, being in straitened circumstances. Ah, Madame Aurore understood! She would be most economical with the coals.

All the same she wasn't.

But what did it matter! since she turned us out dresses that we were sure Hermione, herself, would have characterised as "Dreams." Bettina went about the house, singing:

> "'Where are you going to, my pretty maid?'
> 'Going to London, Sir,' she said. . . ."

* * * * *

Madame Aurore even managed to put the finishing touches to the two frocks made in the village, which Bettina called our Coronation robes—just white muslin, but not "just muslin" at all, after they had passed through Madame Aurore's hands. She listened indulgently while Bettina wondered how the young Princes would like driving through London in a gold coach, and above all how the little Princess would feel; and how she would look; and how did Madame Aurore think she would do her hair?

"I don't like that woman," my mother observed pointedly to Bettina.

"Oh, dearest, she feels it. I know from something——"

"I do not object to her knowing. But I am not interested in Madame Aurore." My mother dismissed her.

The fact was that none of the torrent of talk (carried on now in a whisper, with elaborate deference to the chère malade)—none of it had to do with Madame Aurore herself. We had had to ask her all of the little we came to know about her. She had no regular business in London. Ah, no, she was too often ill. She merely went out to work when she was "strong enuss."

"Zen too, ze leedle gal. I haf to sink about her." The thought seemed one to harass. All would be different if Mme. Aurore had a shop.

We agreed that to have a shop full of lovely French models, would be delightful. And by-and-by the little Aurore would help in the shop.

"*Nevair!*" said Mme. Aurore with sudden passion. She knew all about being in shops. It was to prevent her daughter from knowing, too, that Mme. Aurore must make money. The little Aurore should go to the Convent school—which seemed somehow an odd destination for the daughter of Madame Aurore. She spoke of it as a far dream, beckoning.

"Nossing—but *nossing* can be done in zis world vidout monny." And what people will do for money—oh, little did we know! But the world was like that. Eh bien, Madame Aurore had not made it. *Had* she done so, it would be a better place.

Betty and I smiled at the pains taken to make this clear. Madame Aurore professed herself revolted by an arrangement which made "ze goodness or ze badness of a pairson" dependent upon where you happened to find yourself.

"Par example you can be extrêmement good *here.*" More. She would go so far as to say you must be a genius to discover how to be bad here.

Through Betty's laughing protest, the little woman went on with seriousness to assure us it was "une chose bien différente dans . . ." she checked herself, bit off the end of her thread, and spat it out.

"It is different, you mean, in Crutchley

Street?" Betty asked. And, though she got no answer, I think we both understood the anxious mother to be thinking of the small Aurore left all alone in one of the world's Mean Streets. Perhaps the reason Betty got no answer to her question was that she had slightly raised her voice in putting it, and I had said, "Sh!"

"What ees it?" Madame Aurore demanded, looking round.

"I was only reminding Betty," I said. "We mustn't disturb my mother."

Hah! naturally not. *Whatever* happened, she was not to be disturbed!

I was afraid, from the tone in which Madame Aurore said this, that she thought I had been reproving her. And, to divert her thoughts, I asked: "Who takes care of her—the little daughter—while you are away?"

Again she bit viciously at the thread. "Not motch 'care'!" The small eyes snapped as she drew the thread through the needle's eye. I had never seen even her hands fly so fast, or her whole feverish little body attack the basting with such fury of energy as after that reference to the child left behind in Crutchley Street.

Bettina said soothingly: "I suppose you left her with some good friend?"

"Ze best I haf."

The admission was made in an accent so coldly hopeless that Bettina, round-eyed, said: "Oh, dear, isn't she a nice friend?"

"She is like ozzers. She is as nice as she can afford." Madame Aurore had recovered her shrill vivacity. She had not, after all, taken to heart my hint about keeping our voices down. "In some parts of ze vorld," she went on, in that raised, defiant note, "you might be quite good for a week; wis luck for a few months; but you could not be good from year's end to year's end."

"Why was that?" Bettina asked softly.

Madame Aurore laughed out. "Ze climat!" she said, in a voice that must certainly have penetrated the next room. "Somesing in ze air." Then lower, with a tigerish swiftness: "I shall not ron ze risk for *my* liddle gal! *Non!*" She tossed the satin on the machine, thrust it under the needle, and seemed to work the treadle by dint of compressing lips and knitting brows.

Bettina and I agreed we would not talk to her any more about her daughter, since, unlike most mothers, the thought of her child did not soften Madame Aurore, but made her hard and angry.

We put this down to wounded feelings at my mother's curt dismissal of the theme.

Surreptitiously—for she knew leave would be refused—Bettina gave Madame Aurore some of our old toys, and other little gifts, to take home to her daughter.

I did not prevent this, for I, too, felt uneasily that we ought somehow to make up for our mother's nervous detestation of Madame Aurore.

Had this, as the little dressmaker hinted, something of sheer sickness in it—an invalid's caprice? Bettina said lightheartedly: "Oh, it's only because Aurore is a foreigner. Mother admits she never did like foreigners."

After the first day there was almost no personal interchange between Madame Aurore and her employer. Yet I had a queer feeling that a silent drama was being played out between those two who, without meeting, were acting and reacting upon each other.

Madame Aurore asked each day, How was madame? in a voice of extremest solicitude—nay, of gloomiest apprehension.

I found myself wrestling with an uncomfortable feeling that this hopeless view of my mother's health was somehow prompted by a desire " to get even " with the one unresponsive member of our little circle—to get even in the only way open to Madame Aurore. I knew she advised the housemaid to look out for another place, and offered to find her one in London, where she would be paid double, and have almost nothing to do. The housemaid was greatly tempted, but I was told she said she wouldn't go till her mistress was better.

" Bettair! She vill not last a mont! " said Madame Aurore.

At first such echoes as reached me of these prognostications made me merely angry. But I could not quite cast them aside. I began to wonder miserably if there were anything in this view. After all we, too—even Eric—had held it ourselves, only such a little while before!

I wrote to Aunt Josephine to say that if my mother were not better by Monday morning, I should bring Bettina as arranged; but I would stay only one night and go home the next day.

The question rose on Friday as to whether

Madame Aurore should return to London on Saturday night, or some time on Sunday.

"Saturday night," said my mother with decision.

Bettina ventured to urge the Sunday alternative. "The poor little thing is so tired after sewing all day——"

To which my mother responded by ordering the cart for Saturday evening.

"I cannot sleep with that woman in the house."

Bettina ran in to say Madame Aurore was ready to say good-bye. To our embarrassment, our mother would not permit Madame Aurore to enter the room, even for the purpose of taking leave.

We went out and did what we could to soften the refusal. "She has not been sleeping. . . ." "She is trying to rest. . . ." "She is so much obliged to you. . . ."

Ah, Madame Aurore understood. Our poor, poor mother was undoubtedly failing. We were adjured to take every care. Certainly we should not both leave the poor lady.

We told Madame Aurore that we should

never forget her. "I shall take good care of the address," Bettina said.

No, Madame Aurore would send us a new address. She was looking for larger rooms. She believed she was going to be stronger now. She meant to take on two or three hands. In that case, she would not be able to go out any more to people's houses. She would let us know. . . .

She filled the hall with her patchouli and shrill vivacity, and presently was gone.

When we went back into my mother's room, we found her telling the housemaid to hang our gowns in a draught "to purify them."

Betty was moved to some final remonstrance.

My mother cut her short: "That was a horrible woman!"

"Well, well," I said, "she's gone."

"Yes. That is the best that can be said of Madame Aurore. We are done with her for ever."

CHAPTER XXV

GOING TO LONDON

MERCIFULLY, no soul can stand at the pitch of tension long. Those too frail snap. The strong relax. As I have learned since, few who have to do with lingering illness but come to know the gradual, inevitable dulling of apprehension in the watchers. Eric says the power of human adaptability sees to it that the abnormal state of the sufferer shall come by mere continuance to wear an air of the normal. And so the watcher, with no violence to loyalty, or conscience, is relieved of the sharper sympathy.

Certainly, my mother seemed to us in no worse case than many a time before. Bettina and I agreed that she began to improve the moment Duncombe air was no longer poisoned for her by the presence of poor Madame Aurore. What Eric had said of our trustworthy servants was true. Yet I had brought my mother to agree that my absence, now, was to be a matter only of hours, even if I went back for the Coronation.

And still I was not spared a profound sinking of the heart at the moment of leave-taking. I put my misgiving down to the fear that parting from Bettina for four long weeks, would be more than my mother's scant reserve of strength could bear.

As for Bettina (oh, when I remember that!) —Bettina showed the bravest front; calling back from the door: "I shall write you every blessed day."

"Yes," my mother steadied her voice to answer. "I shall want to hear everything. The good and—the less good."

"There won't be any 'less good.' It's all going to be glorious."

* * * * *

As Big Klaus's dog-cart took us across the heath I strained my eyes for some glimpse of Eric. A week that day since he had come and shared his secret! He could never mean to let me go without a word. Not till the train was in motion could I give up hope. I stood a moment longer at the window looking back. No sign.

I took my seat between Betty and an old gentleman; she and I both too stirred and excited to talk. Betty, half-turned away, looked out of her window, and I, across her shoulder and over the flying hedges, looked still for a man who might be walking the field-paths, looked for the bright green roof of his Bungalow, looked for the chimneys of the farm.

No sign.

I sat fighting down my tears.

Not an hour of these bustling days had been so full, but I had felt the blank of Eric's silence. And now again I met the ache of loss with: This will teach you! You were dreading a little time away. He adds a week to our parting. *He* doesn't mind. It's only you, poor fool—only you who mind.

I looked round, in a sudden terror, lest anyone should be noticing that my eyes were wet.

Mercifully, the people were all looking at Betty. I looked at Betty, too. I could not see her eyes, but the nearer cheek was that lovely colour whose name she gave once to an evening sky. We had come up on the top of a knoll and stood for a moment, breathless. My mother had said no painter could get such a colour. And neither were there any words in the language to describe it. For it was not red, not flame, not pink, nor orange. But Betty, looking steadily, had found the right words for it: " A fiery rose."

And that was the colour in Betty's cheeks on the way to London.

No wonder people looked at her. There was a man who got out of the first-class carriage next us at every station, and walked by our window. He looked in at Bettina. I was glad our carriage was full. I felt sure, if it had not been, he would have come in. I could see Bettina did not resent the staring. And then I saw her look out of the corner of her eyes.

" Bettina ! " I whispered. " Don't encourage that strange man to stare in here."

" *Me?* " she said. " What am I doing? "

I told her again that she encouraged him. But I was handicapped by not being able to say just how. I admitted that what she did was very slight. But it was enough. " It was what you did to Eddie Monmouth." Then, because she pretended not to understand, I told her that she was falling into bad deceitful ways. I knew she had written to Ranny Dallas. . . . Yes, and kept writing, though the moment I realised what was going on I wrote to Ranny myself. I said if any more letters came from him, I should have to tell Betty about the girl in Norfolk. Ranny wrote back that he had told Betty himself! And still they went on corresponding, secretly. I said to her now, that I should hardly be surprised if she was hoping to meet Ranny in London.

"Oh, one may 'hope' almost anything," said Betty airily.

"Not of a man who is engaged to another girl!"

"Yes," said Betty; "as long as he isn't married. . . ."

Then, rather frightened, I asked outright if she was really expecting to meet Ranny somewhere.

"How can I say? He is fond of the opera," she said in a very superior, grown-up way. "I *might* happen to see him some night in the throng——"

"In the throng! Betty," I said. "You have given Ranny Dallas your address."

"No," she said; "but I've given it to Tom Courtney."

Tom Courtney was Ranny's red-haired friend. "If you had watched," Betty said, "you would know that I was corresponding with Tom Courtney, too. Chiefly about Ranny. Tom Courtney is a splendid friend. He explains things much better than Ranny can. And then" (Betty's momentary annoyance vanished in laughter)—"then, too, Tom can spell—beautifully!"

I refused to laugh.

"I knew you'd be horrified," Betty said again, "and that is why I have to keep things from you. You are a sort of nun. *You* never feel as if all your blood had been whipped to a syllabub. And besides——"

"Besides?"

"I do like nice men. I don't mind their knowing. And I don't mean to be an old maid. *You* wouldn't care."

"You think I wouldn't?" I had no time to say more, for the train stopped. We thought at first we had reached Victoria Station, but it was only Clapham Junction. The "staring" man passed once more, with a porter behind carrying golf-clubs and portmanteau. Our carriage, too, was emptying. The people stood and reached things down from the racks, and then filed out. When the train went on we were alone.

Betty was still excited, but more grave, even harassed—a look that sat rather pitiful on her babyish face.

I moved up close to her again, and I told her there was something I had to say before we got to London. "You and I, you see, we don't know very much, and we get carried away."

"You mean me," said Betty. "You are thinking about Eddie Monmouth and——"

Then I told her I did not mean her alone. "I don't know how it is," I said, remembering Mr. Whitby-Dawson and Captain Monmouth and Ranny—yes, and others—"I don't know how it is, but girls seem to 'care' more than men do."

"I've thought that, too," Bettina said.

I said I was sure it was true. Men had so much to do. Life was so full for them . . . perhaps that took their minds off. I put my arm round Bettina and held her close. "I am going to confess something," I said, "that most older sisters would deny. But you have got nobody but me. And I have nobody but you. We must help each other."

"I shall have Aunt Josephine," Betty reminded me.

"A stranger—and too old besides." I dismissed Aunt Josephine for the particular purpose in view. "I am going to tell you something very —particular." Then, while she looked at the cushions opposite, and I looked out of the window, I told her I had learned from Eric Annan what she had learned through the others. "We'll say it just this once, and never, never again so long as we live! And we may have to deny it," I warned her. "But I think, if I'm honest about it with you, maybe you won't feel that I don't understand . . . or that I am, as you say, 'different.' You will feel closer to me," I pleaded. "And maybe we shall both be stronger for that." I waited a moment. I was glad Betty still stared straight in front of her. "We don't only care more than men do," I said. "We *need* men more than they need us."

Bettina turned at that. I felt her eyes on me. Then she looked down and stroked my hand.

"I think Mr. Annan does care about you," she said.

"A little," I said. "Not enough. Not as I care."

Bettina pointed out that Eric Annan was not so young as we. " Why, he must be thirty. Perhaps when he was our age "—our eyes met in the new comradeship, and then fell—" he may have taken more interest in—more interest in the things we think about."

Then she took it back. " No, no. You may depend it's only girls who are like that—caring so terribly much. I thought it was only me. But if you are like that too, maybe there are others." After a moment: " You were good to tell me," she said. " I don't feel so—unnatural."

The train was slowing. The light grew grey. We were in a dim place, between a smoky wall and a rattling train going out as we came in. Then the platform, and the porters running along by our windows. " Luggage, miss? "

Bettina started up.

" Aunt Josephine! "

CHAPTER XXVI

AUNT JOSEPHINE

SHE was an imposing figure, beautifully dressed in black. She was handsomer than her picture, and younger-looking than we expected. It occurred to me that bio-vibratory sympathism had a thinning effect.

Her manner was more decisive than I had expected from a dreamer. Very commanding and important, she stood there with her liveried servant behind her. Bettina had known her instantly by the grey hair rolled high and the pear-shaped earrings.

She kissed us, and said I was more like my mother. And were our boxes labelled?

She hardly waited for us to answer. She did not wait at all for our little trunk.

" A footman will attend to the luggage," she said. As she led us down the platform, her eyes kept darting about in a way that made me think she must be expecting someone else by that train. I looked round, too. But nobody else seemed to be expecting Aunt Josephine, though a woman towards the end of the platform looked very searchingly at our party as we passed. Aunt Josephine did not seem to notice. She was busy putting on a thick motor-veil over the lace one that was tied round her hat—her lovely hat, that, as Betty said afterwards, was "boiling over with black ostrich-feathers."

A wonderful scent had come towards us with Aunt Josephine—nothing the least like that faint garden-smell that clung to our linen, from the sprays of lavender and dried verbena our mother put newly each year under the white paper of our wardrobe-shelves. Such a ghost of fragrance could never have survived here. This perfume of Aunt Josephine's—not so much strong as dominant—routed the sooty, acrid smell of the station. When she lifted her arms to put the chiffon over her face, fresh waves of the rich, mysterious scent came towards us.

She seemed in haste to leave so mean a place as Victoria. She spoke a little sharply to the footman. He explained—and, indeed, we could see—that a great, shining motor-car was threading its way as well as it could through a tangle of taxi-cabs and inferior cars. Aunt Josephine stood frowning under her double veil, and once I saw her eyes go towards the woman who had noticed us. The woman was speaking to one of the porters. The porter, too, looked at Aunt Josephine and nodded. The dowdy woman gave the porter a tip, and sent him on an errand. I was far too excited to notice such uninteresting people, but for the curious personal kind of detestation in the look the dowdy woman fixed upon Aunt Josephine.

"We won't wait," said our aunt. "We'll take this taxi."

But just then the beautiful shining car swerved free, and we were hurried in. The footman spread a rug over our knees. As we glided out of the station I noticed the dowdy woman asking her way of a policeman.

And the policeman didn't know the way. He shook his head. And both of them looked after us.

As we whirled through the crowded streets I felt how everyone must be envying Bettina and me.

Presently we came to a quiet corner. The houses stood back from the street, in gardens. Our aunt's was one of these.

I was too excited to notice much about the outside. But the inside!

Betty and I exchanged looks. We had no idea Aunt Josephine was so rich. There were more big footmen—foreigners; very quick and quiet.

The entrance-hall and stairs were wide and dim. When the front-door was shut, the house seemed as silent as a church on a week-day, and the soft-footed servants rather like the sidesmen who show strangers to their places. The very window was like a window in a church. It had stained glass in it, and black lines divided it from top to bottom, into sections, like church windows.

If I had ventured to speak I should have whispered. Not even at Lord Helmstone's had we trodden on such carpets. No wonder our footsteps made no sound. Going upstairs we seemed like a procession in a picture. That was because the walls were immense mirrors separated by gilded columns.

Aunt Josephine had taken off her motor-veil. She had certainly grown much thinner since she had the photograph taken. That accounted for her being a more "aquiline" aunt than we expected. Her nose curved down, especially when she smiled. And her eyes were not sleepy at all —a full yellow eye, the iris almost black.

We followed her along a corridor till she threw open a door. "This is yours," she said in the voice that was both sharp and quick.

I looked into the wonderful pink and white room. Instead of two little beds, as we had at home, was one very large one. It looked like an Oriental throne with rose-silk hangings.

"I will send you up some tea," she said. "And you must rest. I am having a friend or two to dine. So wear your smartest gown. Come," she said to Betty.

"Betty is the one who ought to rest," I said.

"And so she shall," our aunt said. "I will show Betty her room."

Betty looked blank.

"We are not to be together?" she asked.

"Together!" Aunt Josephine repeated the word with the smile that drew her nose down. "Oh, you shall have a room of your own."

Betty moved a little nearer me.

I explained that she and I always had the same room.

"Yes, in a small house. Here there is no need."

I wanted to tell her that it was not need that made us share things. But though poor Betty looked cast down, all I said was that I should come to her in plenty of time to do her hair.

"A maid will do that," my aunt said.

But I managed to tell her quite firmly that I must show the maid how.

Aunt Josephine looked at me a moment.

She doesn't like me, I thought. And I felt uncomfortable.

As she followed her out, Betty made a sign over her shoulder that I was to come now.

But after that look Aunt Josephine had given me, I felt I must walk warily. So I only signalled back, as much as to say "by-and-by."

* * * * *

A woman in a cap and apron brought me tea.

I asked if she would mind taking the tray to my sister's room so we could have tea together.

The woman said madam's orders were that the young ladies should rest. I reflected that Bettina would probably rest better if she did not talk, so I said no more.

The woman had a face like wood.

Two of the big footmen brought in our little trunk. I got out Bettina's dressing-gown and slippers, and asked the wooden woman to take then to my sister.

I was so tired with all the excitement that I went to sleep on the pink satin sofa.

The wooden woman waked me.

" Time to dress," she said, and she had the bath ready. I looked round for our little trunk.

" Oh, you couldn't have a thing like that standing about in here," the wooden woman said.

And, indeed, I had felt, as I saw it coming in, how out of keeping its shabbiness was with all the satin damask, the gilding, and the lace.

She had done the unpacking, the wooden woman said. And there were my white satin frock and silk stockings on the bed. " But half the things in the trunk are my sister's," I said.

She had taken the other young lady what was needed, the woman answered. And whatever I wanted I was to ring for.

I felt that this was no doubt the way of London ladies. But I longed for our shabby little trunk. It seemed the last link with home. I looked round the beautiful room with a sense of distaste.

This feeling must be the homesickness I had read about.

I went to the window. The lines that divided the long panes into panels, the lines that I had thought of as purely decorative were rods of iron.

" You'll be late," the wooden woman said, and she drew the silk curtains over the lace ones, and switched on the electric light.

She came back while I was brushing my hair. She offered to do it for me. I was so glad to be able to do it myself. I would not have liked her to touch me.

I hurried with my dressing so that I could go to Bettina.

The woman tried to prevent me. But I was firm. " Show me the way, will you? Or shall I ask someone else? "

She hesitated, and then seemed to think she had best do as she was told.

Half-way down a long, soft-carpeted passage she asked me to wait an instant.

She knocked at one of the many doors.

I heard my aunt's voice inside. And whispering. Only one of the electric lights was turned on here, in the corridor. The air was heavy. The "Aunt Josephine" scent, foreign, dizzily sweet, was everywhere. A light-headed feeling came over me. I longed for an open window. They must all be shut as well as curtained. Between the many doors, paintings were hung. I had been vaguely conscious of these as we came up. I saw now they were pictures of women. Most of them seemed to be in different stages of the bath. One was asleep in a strange position, with nothing on. I was going past that one when I noticed the opposite door ajar. I stopped and listened.

"Bettina," I said softly.

A voice very different from Bettina's answered in some language I did not know. I started back and, as I was going on, the door was opened wide. A lady stood on the threshold in a flood of light. A lady with a dazzling complexion. Her lips were so brightly red, they looked bloody. She had diamonds in her ears, and a diamond necklace on a neck as white and smooth as china. Her yellow hair was disarranged as though she had been asleep. She was wearing a kimono of scarlet silk embroidered in silver.

She asked me something, not in French, not German, and not, I think, Italian. I said I was afraid I did not understand.

My aunt came noiseless down the long corridor, and the foreign lady hastily shut her door.

This other guest must be some very great person!

My aunt was dressed for dinner in a gown all covered with little shining scales, like a snake's skin.

"What are you doing?" she said, in an odd tone as if she had caught me in something underhand. I explained that I was looking for Bettina. And I found courage to say that I was sorry our rooms were so far apart.

She took no notice of that. "You will see Bettina at dinner," she said, and it struck me she could be very stern.

I felt my heart begin to beat, but I managed to say that I was sure Betty would wait for me to help her to dress.

"I have told you she will have a maid to do all that is necessary."

"I hope you won't mind," I said, "just for to-night. It is always my mother, or me, who dresses Bettina. . . ."

She seemed to consider. I said to myself again: "Oh, dear, she doesn't like me at all."

"Take her, Curran," she said. The hard-faced woman came and piloted me round the angle of the corridor to Betty's door.

We fell into each other's arms, and laughed and kissed, as though we had been parted for weeks.

* * * * *

I was determined not to let her know that Aunt Josephine and I were not liking one another. I only said I didn't like her taste in pictures.

Betty tried to stand up for her. She reminded me of the statues and casts from the antique at Lord Helmstone's. She asked me suddenly if I wasn't well. I complained a little of the air. I thought we might have the window open while I did her hair. But Betty said, no. She had tried, and found she didn't understand London fastenings. So she had rung for the maid, and the maid had said: "This isn't the country"—and that people didn't like their windows open in London.

Betty thought it quite reasonable. London dust and "blacks" would soon ruin this pretty white room.

Betty defended everything.

When I complained that the scent everywhere was making me headachy, Betty said she liked it. She wished our mother would let us use scent. The only thing Betty found the least fault with was the way I was doing her hair. She wanted it put up "in honour of London." But she looked such a darling with her short curls lying on her neck that I was doing it in the everyday way. And there wasn't time now for anything more than to fasten on the little wreath, for the woman came to say madam had sent up for us. So I hurried Betty into her frock, the woman watching out of those hard eyes of hers. Nobody in the whole of Betty's life had looked at her like that. The woman didn't want us to stop even to find a handkerchief. And after all, just as Betty was coming, the woman said: "Wait a minute," and wanted to shut the door. I stood on the threshold waiting. A gentleman was coming upstairs. With his hat on! He stared at me as he went by, and so did the footman who followed him. I drew back into the room and the woman shut the door.

"Who was that gentleman?" I asked. She seemed not to hear. So I asked again.

"*That*—oh, that is the doctor," she said. Naturally we asked if somebody was ill.

"Not very," she answered in such a peculiar way we said no more.

She stood and watched us as we went downstairs.

* * * * *

"Our first London dinner-party," Bettina whispered.

We took hands. We were shaking with excitement.

We saw ourselves going by in the mirrors between the golden columns.

The whole place was full of tall girls in white, and little girls in apple-green, wearing forget-me-not wreaths in their hair.

CHAPTER XXVII

AT DINNER

Down in the lower hall were the men-servants with their watchful eyes.

They showed us the drawing-room door.

As we came in, I was conscious again of Aunt Josephine's appraising look. Then of the elaborate grey head turning towards an old man, as if to ask: Well, what do you think of my nieces? He had a red blotchy face. The kind of red that is crossed by little purple lines like the tracery of very tortuous rivers on a map. The lines ran zigzagging into his nose, which was thick at the end, round and shining. He had no hair except a sandy fringe, and his eyes, which had no lashes, looked as if he had a cold. He was introduced as " an old friend of mine "—but she forgot to tell us his name. We heard him called Colonel. Through all the scent we could not help noticing that he smelled of brandy.

I looked round for the beautiful foreign lady.

But I was prepared to find her late, after seeing her idling at her door, in a dressing-gown, so near the dinner-hour.

There was only one other person. A man of about thirty-six. Good-looking I thought—and not happy. He had a clear face, quite without colour. The skin very smooth and tight. His dry brown hair was thinning on the crown. He had nice hands. I noticed that when he stroked his close-fitting moustache. I did not like him because of his manner. I did not know what was wrong with it. Perhaps he was only absent-minded. But when I tried to imagine him talking to my mother I could not.

He was introduced first to Bettina. The others treated him as if he were very important. They talked about his new Rolls Royce, which turned out to be a motor-car. The Colonel tried to get him to say how many times he had been fined for "exceeding speed limit." Then they talked about "The Tartar." How he was always late. It would be a chance if he came at all. Aunt Josephine was positive he would appear. "I wired to say it was all right."

"Just as well, perhaps, if he doesn't come to-night," the good-looking man said. He would be in a devil of a temper.

Betty asked why would he? They said because his favourite horse had been "scratched." Betty thought it was nice of him to be so fond of his horse. But if it was only a scratch——

We did not know why they laughed. But we laughed too. We tried not to show how unintelligible the talk was. I listened very hard. I felt like a learner in a foreign tongue. I understood the words but not the sentences.

The Colonel looked at his watch in a discontented way. Then we went in to dinner.

I don't think we sat in the order Aunt Josephine had meant. But the absent-minded man, who had taken me in, refused to change, or to let me. I had the old Colonel on my left. Aunt Josephine of course at the head. The empty place was between her and Betty.

The table was glittering and magnificent. We had little helpings of strange, strong-tasting food before the soup. And caviar.

"You like caviar?" the Colonel said.

I said I didn't know, for in my heart I felt it looked repulsive.

"Don't know caviar?"

I said of course I had heard of it. He asked where. And I said, "In Shakespeare." The old Colonel choked, and they all laughed to see how apoplectic he looked—all except Betty and me.

I caught Betty's eye. She had that fiery-rose in her cheeks. I felt excited, too, and "strange." But I hoped they didn't notice. Betty and I had agreed that we must try not to show how unused we were to the ways of a great London house. So I made conversation. I asked about the absent guest.

My good-looking man pretended to be annoyed. He called, in his slightly husky voice, across the table to Aunt Josephine: "Already she wants to talk about The Tartar!" I explained that I meant the foreign lady—the very beautiful lady I had seen upstairs looking out of her door.

Again my man exchanged glances with Aunt Josephine. He was smiling disagreeably. Aunt Josephine did not smile at all. But the old Colonel laughed his croaking laugh, and said the lady upstairs expected people to go to her.

"Does she expect dinner to go to her, too?" Betty asked. And something in their faces made

Betty blush, though she didn't know why, as I saw. I believed they were teasing Betty, just for fun, and to see that beautiful colour in her cheeks flicker and deepen.

So I leaned towards her, and across the flowers and the dazzling lights I told her the foreign lady was not very well. That was why she was not coming down.

The Colonel asked me why I thought the lady wasn't well. So I said: " Because I saw the doctor going up to her."

They were all quite still for a second or two. I looked at Aunt Josephine. Why was it wrong to mention the doctor's visit? Was she afraid of making these friends of the beautiful lady anxious about her? My man still was smiling, but not pleasantly. I couldn't tell whether the strange noises the Colonel made were choking or laughing. But I felt more and more miserably shy; And I had no clear idea of why I should feel so—unless it was that nothing these people said meant what it seemed to mean.

I could see that Betty was bewildered, too.

We knew we should feel strange; we did not know we should feel like this.

I was thankful when they all turned round and called out. "The Tartar" had come, after all.

He made no apology for being late, nor for not having dressed. He strolled in as if the place belonged to him—a great broad-shouldered young man in a frock-coat. He had a round, black, cannon-ball of a head, and his eyebrows nearly joined. His moustache was like a little blacking-brush laid back against the lip, with the bristles sticking straight out. But he seemed to be making this effect deliberately, by pushing out his mouth like a pouting child; or, even more, like a person with swollen lips. I felt sure I could not have seen him before; but there was something oddly familiar about him.

He nodded to the others.

When Aunt Josephine said, "My nieces," he said, "Oh," stared a moment, and then, as he lounged into the empty place, said it had been a rotten race. I thought how astonished my mother would have been at such behaviour. Betty must have been thinking of her, too, for she put on our mother's manner. It was a beautiful manner, but it sat oddly on my little sister; it made her seem more self-possessed than she was. She turned and said: " I think you must be Mr. Whitby-Dawson."

The young man stared.

Everybody stared.

He turned sharply from Betty to his hostess. She shook her head. But the yellow part of her big eyes had turned reddish. She looked very strange.

A creepy feeling came over me.

I remembered she had been " most eccentric " twenty years ago. Was eccentricity the sort of thing that grew worse as people grew older?

I looked round at the company and met the eyes of the neighbour on my right. They were unhappy eyes; but they reassured me.

" What put such an idea into your head? " Aunt Josephine was asking Betty.

" Because," Betty said, and she looked at the young man again, " only because I saw so many of your—of Mr. Whitby-Dawson's photographs——"

" Really? " the young man said, in a bored voice. " That was, no doubt, a great privilege. My name's Williams."

In her embarrassment Betty turned to the man who sat between us. "He has even the little scar," she said, like a person defending herself. "Mr. Whitby-Dawson got his scar in a duel with a student at Heidelberg. He studied at the University there part of one year——"

"Studied duelling?" the Colonel chuckled. Our absent-minded man was not absent-minded any more. He was listening, with a look I could not understand, as if he took a malicious pleasure in poor Betty's mistake. Such a trifling slip to have taken the young man for Guy Whitby-Dawson, and yet it seemed to have put the company out of tune. Or perhaps it was the loss of the race. All except my man seemed to care very much about the lost race. The Tartar, in his annoyed voice, told his hostess and the Colonel how it happened. He leaned his elbow on the table, and almost turned his back on poor Bettina.

I thought I could see that my man seemed not to like The Tartar; and that gave me a kindlier feeling towards him; I wondered what had made him unhappy.

I felt I wanted to justify Bettina to him.

I felt, too, that she would recover herself sooner if we broke the silence at our end. So I said—in a voice too low, I thought, for the others to hear—that I also had noticed the resemblance to Mr. Whitby-Dawson. Lower still, he asked me how we came " to hear of Mr.—of—the gentleman in question." Then Betty and I between us told about Hermione Helmstone's engagement—only we did not, of course, give her name.

" The faithless Whitby! " our man said, with the tail of his eye on the young gentleman opposite. As for him, he tried to go on talking about " Black Friar," as though he heard nothing of the history being retailed on the other side. But I had a feeling that he was listening all the time.

Bettina's loyalty to Hermione made her object to hearing Guy called faithless. " They would have had only £400 a year between them. And he said—Mr. Whitby-Dawson said—they couldn't possibly live on that. He was miserable, poor man! "

" I should say so! Poor and miserable."

" Oh, you laugh," Bettina protested. " But I saw a heart-broken letter about the poverty that kept them apart and condemned him ' to run in single harness.' "

"'Single harness!'" the husky voice said. And he repeated it: "'Single harness,' eh?"

Bettina was recovering her spirits. She said something about Duncombe. And I don't know what reminded her of the collie-dog story; but she told it very well, though she did "pile it on." She made me out an immense heroine, and I am afraid I looked sheepish.

The husky voice said "Good!" and "Pretty cool." The story seemed to remind him of something. He looked at his plate, and he looked at Bettina and me.

Betty was amused at having made me feel shy, and she laughed that bubbling laugh of hers.

The Tartar turned his head.

He did not take away his elbow. But he looked over his shoulder down on Bettina's apricot-coloured hair. The fillet showed the shape of her head. It defined the satiny crown, where the hair lay as close as a red-gold skull-cap. The forget-me-nots and the little green leaves held all smooth and tight except the heavy, shining rings. They fell out and lay on her neck.

The Tartar stopped talking about the race.

He still ate his food condescendingly—with one hand. But he drank with great good-will.

He called to the butler, who had been going round with a gold-necked bottle in a napkin. He was to come back, The Tartar said, and fill the ladies' glasses.

I said no. Bettina said she, too, drank water.

The Tartar said " Nonsense ! "—quite as though the matter were for him to decide. The servant filled Bettina's tall, vaselike glass. Bettina looked alarmed. Already she had displeased this dreadful Tartar once.

" Ought I ? " she telegraphed across to me. I shook my head.

" There is one woman in London "—The Tartar made a motion towards the head of the table —" one woman who's got a decent cellar." The Tartar was almost genial. He raised his glass to my aunt. " I approve of the new coiffure, too. Rippin' ! "

The Colonel was not to be diverted from the subject of the wine. " Take an old man's advice," he said to me. " It's a chancy sort of world. Make sure of a little certain bliss." He lifted his own glass and drained it.

The Tartar said something to Bettina which I could not hear. She looked up at him with a kind of wonder in her eyes, and with that " fiery rose " quite suddenly overspreading her face again. She put out her hand to the tall glass, hesitated, and then looked at the head of the table. Perhaps Bettina saw what all of a sudden was clear to me. Aunt Josephine was like a huge grey hawk. The head craning out; the narrow forehead, all grey crest; the face falling away from the beak. How she had changed from the days when she had a double chin! The tilt of the outstretched head was exactly like a bird's. Watching sideways—watching . . . for what?

The eye made me shrink. It made Bettina set her lips, obedient, to the glass. She looked apologetic over the rim at me.

Mine stood untouched.

" I see you have a will of your own," the voice on my right said in my ear.

The London way seemed to be that ladies did not leave the table while men smoked. The talk was about wines, but it flagged. The Tartar kept looking at Bettina. The fitful colour in her cheeks had paled again. The scent of flowers, and that other all-pervading perfume, mixed with the tobacco, was making Bettina faint.

My man noticed it. "You aren't accustomed to smoke," he said to Bettina, and he twisted his cigar round on his fruit-plate till he crushed out the burning. But the others took no notice.

I was sure Bettina was trying hard to throw off her oppression. I thought of our mother; and the thought of her sent sharp aching through me. Bettina and I looked at each other. I knew by her lip she had great trouble not to cry.

"Do you think," I whispered to my man, "you could ask to have a window opened?"

He said we would be going into the drawing-room soon. "Drink that black coffee," he recommended.

He seemed not unkind, so I tried to think why he would not do so small a thing for us as ask to have a window opened. "Are the downstairs windows barred with iron, too?"

He looked sharply at me.

"I believe so," he said.

I thought it must be because of all the silver and valuables in the house. But he glanced at me again, as if he thought I was still wondering and might ask someone else. Then he said he had heard "it used to be a private madhouse."

"*This house?*"

He nodded.

"You needn't say I told you."

That, then, was what I had been feeling. The poor mad people who used to be shut up here—they had left this uncanny influence behind. A strangeness and a strain.

The Colonel was speaking irritably to one of the footmen. Something had gone wrong with an electric-light bulb over the sideboard.

"Send for Waterson to-morrow to attend to that!"

No one but me seemed at all surprised to hear the Colonel giving orders in my aunt's house.

As I sat there in the midst of all the contending scents, with the soft clash of silver, glass, and voices in my ears, a train of ideas raced through my brain as crazy as any that could have been harboured here in the days when . . .

The letters that had come out of this house Eric had called "demented."

All the windows were still barred.

What if it were a private madhouse still! Before my eyes the watchful big footmen turned into keepers to the Grey Hawk and to the lady upstairs. The doctor—he was for those too dangerous to trust downstairs. That was why they had laughed at my inquiry—such callousness had familiarity bred. The Colonel might be the proprietor of the house. My aunt was well off. No doubt they humoured her. With a keeper dressed like a footman, they allowed her certain liberties—to write crazy letters in her harmless intervals . . . friends to dine . . . nieces to divert her. They would do almost anything to keep that red look out of her eyes.

"There is one thing I don't understand," I began to say to the man at my side.

But he was nervous too, and jumped down my throat: "Don't ask me questions! I never passed an examination in my life," he pulled out his watch. "And I've got an engagement to keep in exactly three minutes' time."

No wonder I stared. One man comes when dinner is half done, and one wants to go before the hostess had risen. For my part I wanted him *not* to go . . . I told him so.

"Why?" he turned suddenly and faced me.

I said it was perhaps because I felt I knew him best. "Anyway," I persisted, "don't go!" He hesitated. "*Please* don't go," I said. I was relieved when he said, very well, he would "see it out." For I knew, had he gone, my aunt would think I had driven him away.

There was a rustle, and I saw Aunt Josephine rising. My man left me instantly. He went and opened the door. As we filed out he turned towards my aunt. I heard him whisper, *"Je vous fais mes compliments, madame."* He looked at Betty.

Aunt Josephine nodded. "But . . ." her face changed.

What was wrong? For whom was that "but"? I turned quickly and caught the yellow eyes leaving my back. I was "but." But why? What had I done? The Colonel talked to Betty and The Tartar, as he led the way back to the drawing-room. The other man still was behind with my aunt. He seemed to be reassuring her. His curious low voice kept going off the register. At a break I heard the words: "Doucement" enunciated with an emphasis that carried.

I kept thinking how all the softly-draped windows had iron bars behind the silk.

In the drawing-room, my aunt was saying to The Tartar, "Oh, yes, Bettina sings and dances."

"She sings," I said.

"Don't you skirt-dance?" The Tartar asked.

Bettina looked sorry. "I can dance ordinary dances," she said. "But what sort is a skirt-dance?"

The men made a semicircle round her to explain.

Betty said she hadn't done any skirt-dances since she was a little girl.

"Oh, and what are you now?" the Colonel said, grinning horribly.

They made Bettina tell about the action-songs our mother had taught us in the nursery. They asked her to do one.

Of course Bettina refused. "They're only for children," she said with that little air borrowed from our mother.

The Tartar threw back his bullet head and roared. The Colonel said they were sick, in London, of sophisticated dancing. What they wanted was Bettina's sort. Bettina shook her head.

The Grey Hawk said it was too soon after dinner. But they went across the room towards the piano.

I was following, when the man who had taken me in to dinner said: "This is a comfortable chair." So I sat down.

He said something about the strangeness of London "just at first." It would pass away.

I told him I hoped Bettina would find it so. As for me, I was only staying till to-morrow.

He looked so surprised that I explained I had to go back and take care of my mother.

"You have never been to London since you were a child—and you come all this way just for a few hours?"

"I came to take care of Betty," I said. "She has never travelled alone."

He looked at me: "And you?"

"Oh, I haven't either. To-morrow will be the first time. But then, I am older."

He said nothing for several moments. I looked across the room to where I could see the back of Bettina's head, between the bare crown of the Colonel and The Tartar's black bullet. The Tartar was bending over towards Bettina. Aunt

Josephine sat near them, facing the door, and us.

My man looked up suddenly and saw the eyes of the Grey Hawk on us.

"We must talk!" he said, with a laugh, "or they will think we aren't getting on. That isn't a comfortable chair after all." He stood up. I said it was quite comfortable. While he was insisting, a servant came in to speak to my aunt. I caught a glimpse through the door of a footman going upstairs with a short, fattish young man. Too young, I thought, to be another doctor.

We went to the end of the room, and we sat on a sofa near the fireplace—one of those sofas you sink down in till you feel half buried. I didn't like to say I hated it, for he was taking so much trouble. He put a great down cushion at my back, as if I were an invalid.

"There! Now, can you sit quite still for a few minutes? As still as if I were taking your picture?" I said I supposed I could. "And must I look pleasant?" I laughed. He hesitated and then: "How good are your nerves?" he asked.

"Very good," I boasted.

But he was grave.

"Have you ever fainted?"

"Never!" I said, a little indignantly.

"Could you hear something very unexpected, even horrible, and not cry out?"

"You know something!" I thought of an accident to my mother. "You have news for me. . . ."

"Careful," he said in a sharp whisper. "You told me you could keep perfectly still. If you can't I won't go on." I begged him to go on, and I kept my face a blank. He turned his head slightly and took in the group at the other end of the room. He sat so a moment, with his eyes still turned away, while he said: "Everything—more than life, depends on your self-control during the next few minutes."

I sat staring at him.

"Have you any idea where you are?"—and still he looked not at me but towards the others.

My first bewilderment was giving way to fear. No fear now of anything he could tell me. Fear of the man himself. I saw it all. Not that iron-grey woman who had left the room with the servant, not the brilliant lady upstairs, but the person who had set me thinking wild thoughts at dinner about barred windows and private lunatic asylums.

The man sitting not three feet way from me—was mad.

I calculated the distance between me and the other group, while I answered him: " I am at my aunt's—Mrs. Harborough's."

" Where does your aunt live? "

" At 160 Lowndes Square."

" You are twenty minutes from Lowndes Square. You are in one of the most infamous houses in Europe."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE GREY HAWK

MINUTES seemed to go by. Vague hints from servants, things I had read in the papers—and still I sat there, not moving by so much as a hair.

He was looking at me now and telling me to "keep cool." And then: "I suppose you know there *are* such places——" He interrupted himself to say: "Remember! A careless look or move would mean—well, it would mean ruin. *Now* do you understand?"

Beyond a doubt I did. If I moved or cried for help, he would kill me before my aunt could get back; before I could cross the room. Though why he should wish to kill me I could form no idea.

"You must have time to recover," he said, in that muted, uneven voice. "I will shield you while you pull yourself together." He had bent forward till his shoulders shut out my view of the group at the other end of the room.

I shrank further back into the cushions. But:

"I have myself in hand, now," I said; for I remembered you must never let the insane know you are afraid.

Betty's laughter sounded far away.

"Take your time," he said. "They're enjoying themselves. They haven't even rung for the cognac and liqueurs yet." They would make Bettina and me drink a liqueur, he said. Or if they failed in that, they'd say, "'a thimble-full of coffee, then.'" And our coffee would be "doctored."

"But we've had coffee," I said, in a new access of terror. Was it drugged coffee that made me feel so lamed?

"That was all right," he said. "That was to steady *us*."

He did not look as if he needed steadying. What if he were not mad?

"Be careful," he said again. "Remember I am running a ghastly risk in telling you. But you are facing a ghastly certainty if I don't.

I sat in that stillness of stark terror—staring at him.

And as I stared I found myself clinging to the thought that had been horror's height a little while before. "Pray God he's mad," I kept saying inwardly.

If I could keep my head, he said, I had no cause to be so frightened. It would be some little time before he could give me up without rousing suspicion.

"Before you give me up!" I imagined the Grey Hawk swooping to snatch me.

"Before I help you to get out of this," he explained. "And when I do, you will perhaps remember it is at a sacrifice. Greater than I supposed I could feel."

I moved at that—but like a sleep-walker on the edge of waking.

I asked him in a whisper what we were to do. I meant Betty and me. But he said: "When she begins to play, or to sing, you are to get up quite quietly—*can* you?"

I made a sign for yes.

"No haste . . . you must do it languidly—go out of the room."

"But my——" (I suppressed "my aunt" with an inward twist of questioning anguish) "——shall I not be asked where I am going and why?"

He said no. Because he would make the others a sign. He thought my sister was too excited to take any notice of my going. " But if she does, I'll tell her you wanted her to go on singing. I shall seem to be coming after you. But I'll stop to explain that we've had an argument about one of the pictures in the hall." He told me what I was to do.

"If, after all, they were to prevent me—what, what then?"

" They won't—they will leave you to me." He said it with a look that stopped the heart.

I implored him to let me go out alone.

He fixed his unhappy eyes on mine. " You would never be allowed out of this room alone."

" I could say I must post a letter."

" They would ring for a servant."

I measured the long room. " If once I got as far as the door I could run."

"——as far as the front door perhaps. You would find it locked. No servant would open it for you."

" Will they for you?"

" I can do it for you," he said, under his breath, and he stood up.

I thought he meant I was to make trial then of that terrible passage to the door. But was it not better to be where Betty was, whatever came —Betty and I together—than Betty alone with those devouring-eyed men, and I with a maniac out in the hall!

"I cannot leave my sister!" I said.

He stood in front of me, masking me from the others. "Haven't I made you understand? If you don't leave the room with me, *she* will leave it with Whitby-Dawson."

"No! No!"

He hushed me. "She won't know why—but she'll do it. And she won't come back again. She would probably be on her way to Paris this time to-morrow." He pulled a great cushion up to hide my face. And then he turned and made a feint of getting an illustrated paper off the table. He kept his eye on the others. There was some little commotion, during which Betty had risen. She left the sofa and sat on the piano-stool. She was laughing excitedly.

The man came back to me with the illustrated paper. He sat down closer to me, and held the paper open for a shield. But he held it strangely, with his arm across the picture. The reading part was in French. I had to crane to see over the top—Betty twisting round on the piano-stool, and touching the keys in a provoking way; the two men teasing her to sing.

I have lived over every instant of that hour, until the smallest detail is a stain indelible upon my mind. I have no trouble in remembering. My trouble is to be able to forget.

I hear again that muted voice behind the paper saying: "But for the collie-dog story, I wouldn't have dared to risk this. Everything depends on your nerve." And then he looked at me curiously, and wanted to know if I had not heard there were such places—— "I won't say like this. This is a masterpiece of devilry. And masterpieces are never plentiful."

He waited for me to say something. If I had known what, I could not have said it. I tried hard to speak. But I could only look dumbly in his face. And I saw there was no madness in the unhappy eyes.

"You must have heard or read of places . . . where men and women meet," he insisted.

Then, with an immense effort, I managed to say that I didn't seem able to think. I had been imagining other people insane. But perhaps it was I . . .

I stared over the top of the French paper, that he was both holding up and hiding from me. I thought to myself: "My mind is going." I must have said as much, for he answered quickly: "Not a bit of it! You've had a shock—that's all."

I did not realise it at the time, but, looking back, I seem to see the man's growing horror of my horror, and his fear I should betray him.

"I am sorry I told you," he said.

What was it he had told me? I asked him to help me to understand.

"You make it hard. That isn't fair," he said. "You give me a sense of violation. You implicate me, in spite of the quixotic resolve I made when you begged me not to go. You make *me,* after all, an instrument of initiation."

Yes, he complained. Yet, looking back from the bleak height of later knowledge, I think he betrayed some relish of the moment. Heaven forgive me if I do him wrong! But he was not, I think, losing all that he had come for, or he would have shortened my agony. He was conscious, I think, of the excitement of finding himself, intellectually, on virgin ground. True, he was sacrificing what few of his sort would sacrifice. And he was running the gravest personal risk; for at some point I asked about that. " If she knew what you had told me, what would she do? "

" Call in her bullies to beat me to a jelly."

He was more and more unwilling to seem a mere adjunct of the baseness he unveiled. I was not to judge too harshly. " This situation "—he nodded towards Bettina, the old man, and the young one—" all this, far more crudely managed, is a commonplace in the world—in every capital of every nation on the earth. And it has always been so."

He saw I did not believe him. He seemed to imagine that, while I was being torn on the rack where he had stretched me, I could think of other things. I cried to him under my breath not to torture me any more—" help me quickly to get help! "

He said I must trust him. Everything depended on choosing the right moment. " If you went out now, with that face, you'd pull the house about our ears."

He was doing all he could to calm and steady me, he said. And certainly he tried to make me feel that what to me was like a maniac's nightmare, an abysmal horror beggaring language and crucifying thought—it was all a commonplace to men and women of the world. "Human nature!" "Human nature!"—like the tolling of a muffled bell. Bishops and old ladies imagined you could alter these things. Take India—"I've been there. I knew an official who'd had charge of the chaklas. You don't know what chaklas are? Your father knew. If you'd gone riding round any one of the cantonments you'd have seen. Little groups of tents. A hospital not far off. Women in the tents. Out there it's no secret. They're called "Government women." The women are needed by the army. So there they are."

Women are "needed." Through the chaos came back clear the memory of my talk with Betty in the train: "Men don't need us as much as we need them."

Even Governments, he said, had to recognise human nature, and shape their policies accordingly. I was too young to remember all that talk in the press some years ago, about the mysterious movements of British battleships in the Mediterranean. Instead of hanging about Malta, the ships had gone cruising round the Irish coast. Why? The officials said, for good and sufficient reasons. The chorus of criticism died down. The "reasons" were known to those who had to know. Not enough women at Malta. The British fleet spent some time about the Irish coasts. "Human nature——"

"I can do it now!" I cried under my breath, and I stood up.

He shot out a hand and pulled me back. "Christ! not while the grey hawk is hovering outside! And your lips are livid." A good thing, he said, that I had still a few minutes. "You have your sister to thank. She is a success. She piles up anticipation. The value of that, to the jaded, is the stock-in-trade of people like our hostess. At a time when her profession is a hundred per cent. more dangerous than it's ever been since the world began, she perfects it—makes it pay in proportion to its danger." Couldn't I trust him to know? He gave me his word: "No indecent haste here. They are adepts. They have learned that the climax is less to the sated than the leading up. The leading up is all." After a second: "How did she get hold of you?"

I knew no more than the dead.

"Through someone very well informed. . . ." He probed and questioned. I could only shake my head. But my tortured mind flung itself spasmodically from one figure to another in our little world, and felt each one's recoil from my mere unspoken thought. Until—*the little dressmaker!* Her questions . . . her pains to establish the fact of our isolation, of our poverty . . . her special interest in our aunt. "You haf a photografie—hein?" And then the picture's vanishing. Had it come to this house to serve as model? The Tartar liked "the new coiffure——"

Two servants came in. One carried a great silver tray.

"Oh, leave that a bit!" The Tartar, over the back of the sofa, waved the footman off.

They came towards us, and were told: "Put it there on the table." The man beside me made a show of welcoming it. He dropped the illustrated paper on my lap. "Bend down—bend down low," he whispered.

I bent over the swimming page.

"What will you have?" he called out to me, as the footmen were leaving the room.

I tried to answer. No sound.

"Oh, you prefer crême de menthe, do you?" he said quite loud. "Yes, there's crême de menthe." He filled a glass and brought it to me. "Cognac," he whispered. "It will steady you."

I put my shaking lips to the glass. I did not drink.

"Ah, you are afraid," he said. And he looked at me with his unhappy eyes.

My hand was shaking. Some of the stuff spilt out on my new dress.

"Give it to me," he said, and he drank it off—"just to show" me.

I was conscious that Betty was singing—And that the door had opened. The Grey Hawk stood there with, as I thought at first, a thick-set boy dressed in a man's evening clothes. As she dismissed him I saw he was a hunchback. She shut the door behind the hunchback and the Colonel left the piano and came towards her.

He was laughing. They stood and talked.

"Bend down. Bend low——" the voice said in my ear.

The Colonel's croaking laugh came nearer.

The man at my side called out: "Look here, Colonel. No poaching on my preserves. We are deep in a discussion about Art. You're not to interrupt."

"Oh, Art is it?" The old man had come behind our sofa, and was leaning down between us. I smelt a foul breath. With a sense of choking I lifted my head. The Colonel's watery eyes went from me to the strange ugly picture in the illustrated paper. I did not understand it. I do not think I would have been conscious of having looked at it, but for the expression on the Colonel's face.

Bettina finished her song. They all clapped. In the buzz, Bettina raised her voice. No, no. She couldn't dance, and sing, as well as accompany herself, she said.

"What time is it in?" the grey woman asked. She took Bettina's place at the piano.

Still Bettina hesitated, while The Tartar urged.

"Oh, *I* don't mind," Bettina said, "if you like such babyish songs."

"Of course we do,"—the Colonel went back to them.

Bettina said pertly: "I should think you'd be ashamed." She stood beside the grey woman and hummed the old tune. She helped by striking a few notes.

"Now!" the grey woman said to Betty.

The word was echoed in my ear.

"Now?" I repeated.

"But first"—he caught my hand. "Bite your lip a little. . . . Ah! not blood." He smuggled his handkerchief to me behind the cushion. "You'll be all right," he whispered. "But I wish I could go with you! You see that I must stay behind——"

"Yes, oh yes," I looked at Betty.

"I must stay," he said, "to give you time. Then when I've seen you out of this . . . a door open, a door shut—and I shall never see you again. . . ."

"Now! *Now!*" I hardly noticed that he took his blood-stained handkerchief out of my hand. For Bettina had come forward and stood poised, holding her green skirt with both hands, like a child about to curtsey. I stood up. All the room was dancing with my little sister. I got to the door.

"Where are you going to . . . ?"

Betty sang. But she was too amused and excited to notice me.

My companion had crossed the room, and was bending over the Grey Hawk. She looked round at him surprised, mocking. . . .

Some power came to help me across the threshold. A footman started up out of the floor and stood before me. "Where are you going?" He echoed Betty.

"I am waiting for—one of the gentlemen," I said, and I steadied myself against a chair. If Betty's song stopped, I should know we had failed.

I held my breath, as I leaned over and took my last look into the room. Our friend was leaving the grey woman. She played on. Bettina was dancing, a hand on her hip, the other twirling moustachios—playing the gallant. Such a baby she looked!

And I had done her hair like that——

"What is your fortune, my pretty maid?"

The man had come out and softly shut the door. He gave the footman a strange look and passed him something. "It's all right," he said.

The footman looked in his hand and stared. "Mais, merci—merci, monsieur." He vanished.

I went towards the stairs.

"*That's* not the way," the voice said harshly.

"Shan't I get a cloak——"

"For God's sake, no! It's a question of moments now." He was undoing the door. "Run for your life. First to the left—second to the right—a cab-rank."

I fled out of the house.

CHAPTER XXIX

WHERE?

I STOOD ringing. I thundered at the knocker. I beat the door with my fist.

An old man opened at last.

"Mrs. Harborough! Where is she?" The old man tried to keep me out. But he was gentle and frail. I forced my way past. I called and ran along a passage, trying doors that opened into the darkness.

At last! A room where a woman sat alone—reading by a shaded light.

"Who are you?" I cried out. She laid her book in her lap. "Are *you* Mrs. Harborough? Then come—come quickly . . . I'll tell you on the way——"

The old woman lifted the folds of her double chin and looked at me through spectacles.

"You must come and help me to get Bettina. . . ." I broke into distracted sobbing on the name. "Bettina——! Bettina——!" I seized the lady's hand and tried to draw her out of her chair.

But I was full of trembling. She sat there massive, calm, with a power of inert resistance, that made me feel I could as easily drag her house out of the Square by its knocker, as move the woman planted there in her chair.

Neither haste nor perturbation in the voice that asked me: "What has happened?"

"*Not yet!*" I cried out. "Nothing has happened yet! But we must be quick. Oh, God, let us be quick——"

The butler had followed me in and was asking something. "Yes," said the quiet voice, "pay the cabman."

"No!" I shrieked. "Keep him! I must go back, instantly. . . ." And through my own strange-sounding voice, hers reached me.

"You must see that you are quite unintelligible. Sit down and collect yourself."

"Sit down! Isn't it enough that *one* woman sits still, while—while——"

She was putting questions.

I heard a reproach that seemed to fill the house: "You never came to meet us!"

And while the charge was ringing I felt, with anguish, the injustice of it. How could one have expected this woman to come!

But she should be moved and stirred at last!

"I sent my maid," she was defending herself, "—only a minute or two late."

"The other woman was not late!"

"Who?"

I begged the butler to get a cloak for Mrs. Harborough. She was saying Bettina and I should have waited. And again that I must calm myself and tell her——

"Someone pretended to be you!" I hurled it at her. "She took us to a house—a place where they do worse than murder. Betty is there now——" I told her all I could pack into a few sentences.

"It isn't possible," my aunt said. "This is England."

"*Come and see!* Betty——" But they only thought me mad; they tortured me with questions.

I caught her by the arm. "God won't forgive you if you wait an instant more."

Oh, but she was old and unbelieving! So old, I felt she had looked on unmoved at evil since the world began.

But she was sending for wraps, sending messages. Still she sat there, in the heavy, square-backed chair, her hands upon her knees, her two feet side by side as motionless as the footstool, her heavy shoulders high and square, her lace cap with square ends falling either side her face, like the head-dress of an Egyptian, her air of monumental calm more like a Theban statue than a living woman.

I turned away.

The figure in the chair rose up at last.

Oh, but slowly—slow, and stiff, and ponderous.

I felt in her all the heaviness of the acquiescent since Time began.

" That is right," she said to the old man who had brought the maid.

And the maid was old, too.

Three helpless ghosts.

Like death the sense came over me that I was as badly off with these three, as I had been alone. Again I turned from them, frantic.

" I will go out," I cried, " and find help." I ran towards the door.

It was then the old man made the first sane suggestion. We could telephone to the police.

That would save time! The police would meet us outside Betty's prison.

I followed the butler into the hall. We all stood there, by the telephone. Ages seemed to go by while he was getting the number. And when he had got the number, he could not hear the questions that were put. I tore the receiver out of his hand—I pushed him aside. But I had never used the telephone before, and I spoke too loudly. When they told me so, I sobbed. The voice at the other end was faint and cool. Oh, the easy way the world was taking Betty's fate!

And then the faint cool voice at the other end said something which showed me I was not believed.

He, too, was thinking I was out of my mind.

The receiver dropped from my hand.

"They cannot understand," I said. I told Mrs. Harborough that she must go to Bettina, and I would bring the police.

Some objection was made. I did not stop to hear it: "I cannot wait for any words! And I will not wait another second for any human soul!"

Then, running beside me as I made for the front door, the old butler spoke again: "——a policeman in our square." He would call the policeman in.

The old man was right. A policeman stood at the corner, watching that no harm should come to the ladies of Lowndes Square.

I had run out, with the butler protesting at my heels: "*Not in the street,* miss!" he said, with the first hint of emotion I had found in him.

I did not wait; but he must have brought the policeman in during my outpouring, for the look of the hall during those swift seconds is stamped on my brain. The elderly maid kneeling at her mistress's feet, changing her shoes; the policeman facing my aunt, helmet in hand, his reverent eye falling before the dignity of Mrs. Harborough, while I, at his elbow, poured out broken sentences, interlarded with: "I'll tell you the rest as we go——"

My strained voice was grown weak. I wondered, suddenly, if it had ever really reached their ears.

I was like a person down under the sea, trying to make my voice heard through a mile of murky water.

I was like a woman buried alive, who, in the black middle of the night, beats at her coffin-lid in some deserted graveyard.

"It is no use!" I cried. "I shall go back alone."

At last we were all going out of the door. The policeman put on his helmet.

"And where is this house?" he asked.

"It is—it is——"

A pit of blackness opened. I felt myself falling headlong. I heard a cry that made my flesh writhe—as though the cry had been Bettina's, and not mine.

A voice said: "It is not possible you have forgotten the address!"

I had never known it!

CHAPTER XXX

THE BLUNT LEAD-PENCIL

It must have been half an hour before reason came back. A strange man was there, lean and grey. A friend, I heard—a Healer.

All those old, old faces!

What had they done?

What could they do?—except telephone again to the police the vague and non-committal fact of a girl decoyed and lost to sight in the labyrinth of London.

They dared to think they could get me to bed. They found me, not a girl—more a wild animal!

Out, out I must go.

The outward struggle was matched by the one in my mind. Where should I go? To whom? There must be somebody who would care. Somebody who had Power to give effect to caring. Wildly my ignorance cast about. Who had Power?

The King—yes; and surely the Queen would "care." But who was I to reach the Queen? Her sentinels and servants would thrust me out.

All my crying would never reach the Queen. Then, the only thing that was left was for me to go out and cry the horror in the street.

They held the door while they told me there had been telephoning back and forth. And someone had already gone to Alton Street.

" Is that where Betty is? "

No. Alton Street was the nearest police-station. The person who had been sent there had not yet come back.

Then I, too, must go to Alton Street to learn what they were doing.

The power of the police still loomed immense. At Alton Street I would hear they had already found Betty. She might even be there at this moment . . .

* * * * *

My aunt, the Healer and I driving through deserted streets. How long was it since I had been away from Bettina?

" Oh, not long," they said. And the police beyond a doubt had turned the time to good account.

I had a vision of the Betty I should find at

Alton Street. Fainting, ministered to by men, reverent of her youth and terror. . . .

* * * * *

A grimy room with a counter running down its length. No sign of Betty; only men in uniform grouped in twos and threes behind the counter.

They listened. Yes, my aunt's messenger "had been in." They shook their heads.

The Healer did most of the talking.

A man with a sallow face put a question now and then. He was the inspector.

Although there were only policemen there besides ourselves, the inspector talked quite low, as though he was afraid someone might come to know a girl was lost.

"I can't hear what you are saying!" I said. "She is *my* sister. You must tell me what you are doing to find her."

They had so little to go upon. "The only clue, and that a very slight one," was the cabman. Could I remember what he was like?

The strangeness of the question! Taxi-drivers were as much alike to country eyes as the cabs they drove—— But why ask me? "Bring the man in, and let the inspector see him."

Then they told me. The man who was waiting there outside was not the one who had taken me to Lowndes Square.

But where *was* our " slight and only clue "?

They said that while they all were busied over me, unconscious, the butler had paid the cabman and let him go. He had never thought to take the number. The slight, the only clue, was lost.

But no. The inspector said they would circulate an inquiry for a cabman who had brought a young lady of my description to Lowndes Square that night.

I tried to learn how long this would take—what we could do meanwhile. What had been already done.

They seemed to be saying things which had no meaning. Except one thing. The great difficulty was that I could not describe the outside of the house, nor even the general locality. Which way had we driven from Victoria?

I had no idea.

But surely I had looked about. What had I noticed as we drove away from the station?

I do not know whether at another time I might have answered better, but I could remember only a confused crowd of passengers, porters, taxi-cabs, and motors. Yes, and the woman who had looked after us while she asked her way of a policeman.

Why had she looked after us?

I could no more tell them that than I could tell why both she and the policeman had followed us with such unfriendly eyes.

"Ah!"—the inspector exchanged glances with the Healer—"a possible clue there."

I could not imagine what he meant. I could not believe that he meant anything when I saw the expressionless yellow face turned to Mrs. Harborough to say that "in any case" the Victoria policeman would not be on duty now. The inspector talked about what they would do to-morrow.

"To-night—to-night; what can we do to-night?"

He brought a piece of yellow paper. He put the questions over again, and this time he wrote the answers down with a stump of worn lead-pencil. The glazed paper was like the man, it took impressions grudgingly; it held them very faint.

While the blunt lead-pencil laboured across the sheet, something that other man had said to me in the house of horror flashed back across my mind. I had not believed him at the time, still less now, in the presence of the guardians of the City—all these grave and decent people.

Shamefaced I asked Mrs. Harborough if the inspector knew of "any house where a woman takes young girls."

She and all the rest were one as silent as the other, till I steadied my voice to say again, this time to the man himself: "You have no knowledge, then, of 'such a place'?"

"I don't say that," he answered.

I looked at him bewildered. "You mean you do know of a house—a house where——"

He hesitated too. "We know some," he said.

"You don't mean there are many?"

Again the hesitation. "Not many of the sort you describe." He took up the stump of pencil hurriedly and held it poised. "Try to recollect some landmark," he said—"some building, some statue that you passed."

I did my best to obey—to wrench my mind away from the inside of that place where Betty was . . . to think of what we had seen on the way.

" Did you drive through the Park? " said my aunt.

" No," the inspector answered for me, " she wouldn't take them through the Park; she would go as fast as possible—by side streets——"

But I told them we had passed the Park. We had seen flower-beds through a tall iron railing. She said it was Hyde Park, and the flowers were on our left.

" Hamilton Place. Park Lane." The inspector punctuated my phrases. " Driving north. You crossed Oxford Street? "

I could not say. Other questions, too, I had no answer for. I held my head between my hands trying to force the later impressions out—trying to recover something of that drive I seemed to have taken a hundred years ago in some other state of being. And as I stood so, sobbing inwardly and praying God to let me remember, I heard the inspector say the most horrible thing of all. And it was the horrible thing that gave me a moment of hope. He told my aunt that the police kept a list of "these houses."

A list.

He said the police were "expected to have an eye on such places." And no one contradicted him.

"Even if there are many," I burst out—"you have all these policemen here. You have hundreds more. Those houses in the list must all be searched——"

They would do what they could, he said.

I did not know why they should at the same time speak of doing all they could, and yet should look so hopeless. But I saw that nobody moved. My two companions talked in undertones. The men in uniform still stood in twos and threes. One near a high desk drummed with his fingers on an open book. The Healer folded his thin long hands upon the counter. In that horrible stillness I said suddenly, "Look at the clock!" The clock's hands too were folded, praying people to notice it was midnight.

They stirred a little at my voice. They looked at me and at the clock. The inspector said they were waiting for Mrs. Harborough's messenger.

The messenger had gone out with a constable to make inquiry at the nearest cab shelter.

Why had they not told us that before!

My two companions followed me, talking low.

* * * * *

We were driven to a little wooden house, set close against the curb. Two or three men inside, and one behind an urn was pouring coffee.

Yes, yes, a gentleman had "called." Each one there had been questioned. Others, besides, who had been in and out. No one had taken a lady to Lowndes Square that night.

The door shut behind us. We were out again, in the street.

Two taxi-cabs in the rank, and ours at the curb? Besides our driver and ourselves not a soul afoot, outside the little wooden shelter. Betty—Betty, what am I to do? I looked up at the houses. In almost any one of them must be some good man, who, if he knew, would help me. But the houses were curtained, and dark.

The silence of the streets seemed a deeper silence than any the country knows. The only sound, my two companions whispering. "He" would no doubt be waiting for them at Lowndes

Square, they said. Could they mean, then, to go home . . .?

Betty—Betty—— I looked up again at the houses—houses of great folk, I felt sure. Officials, perhaps; equerries; people about the Court—people whose names we had often seen in the paper as going here and there with the King and Queen. People who would not be turned back at any time of night if they went to the Palace on an errand of life and death. Should I run along the street ringing at all the bells?

I may have made some movement, for Mrs. Harborough took my arm and drew me towards the cab. No, the people in the great houses would be sleeping too far away from those blank doors. Deafness had fallen on the world, and on the houses of good men a great darkness.

A light—at last, a light! shining out of a house on a far corner which had been masked by the cab shelter. And people awake there, for a taxi waited at the door—the door of hope. Above it an electric burner made a square of brightness. In that second of tense listening, my foot on the step of the cab, a raised voice reached me faintly.

I dragged my arm free and went, blind and stumbling, towards the sound. I shall find someone to go to the Queen. . . .!

The Healer had followed quickly: "What are you doing! That's a public-house."

They took me back, they put me in the cab. I hardly knew why I resisted, except that I was looking wildly about for someone to appeal to, and I kept childishly repeating: "The Queen . . . the Queen."

While Mrs. Harborough was being helped into the cab after me, I leaned out of the window on the opposite side, looking up the street and down. The wind blew cold on my wet face.

"The Queen, the Queen! Oh, why are you Queen of England, if you can't help Betty?"

The door of the public-house opened, and a man reeled out. A man in chauffeur's dress. A man—with crooked shoulders!

I remembered now.

I opened the cab-door on my side, and tore across the street with voices calling after me.

The unsteady figure had stooped down by the waiting taxi, and set the machinery whirring.

"Tell me," I bent over him. "Are you the man who brought me to Lowndes Square an hour or so ago?"

The man looked up. As the cab light fell on his face I recognised him.

Oh, God, the relief!

CHAPTER XXXI

THE MAN WITH THE SWORD

"TAKE me back! Take me to the place you brought me from," I cried to the stooping figure.

The others had come up. The chauffeur was vague and mumbling. He was drunk enough to be stubborn, cautious. But money quickened him.

He had picked me up, he said, "in one of the streets. . . ." he couldn't say positively which, and he mentioned several. It might be any one of them; but it wasn't far from St. John's Wood Station.

In spite of the man's condition I wanted to get into his cab. I had a horror of losing him.

"I have taken his number," the Healer said, as though that were enough.

And all the while—— But we are coming, Betty! Coming. . . .

The other driver had been summoned. I heard the names of streets and of police-stations. They settled which would be the one.

"Will you drive very fast?" I asked. "I

will give you all I have if you'll drive fast."

The drunken chauffeur followed us in his swerving, rocking cab. I leaned out of the window all the way, weeping, praying. And I never took my eyes away from the only clue.

Minutes and minutes went by. I seemed to have spent my life hanging out of a taxi window, watching a drunken driver steer his uneven course. He ran up on a curbstone, and the cab tilted. Then it righted, and came on at a terrific pace, almost to capsize again as it turned the abrupt corner, which we ourselves had rounded just before we stopped. I looked up, and saw a light burning in a lantern above an open door.

The room we went into was smaller than the one at Alton Street.

And Betty wasn't there.

Only one man, standing at a high desk. An honest-looking, fresh-coloured man; but quite young. When the others began telling him why we had come I broke in: "This is not an ordinary thing. We must see the inspector."

The young man said he was the inspector.

Among us we told him.

The drunken cabman, almost sober, spoke quite differently. Sensible, alert. Now something would be done! I no longer regretted the youth of the inspector. This man was human.

"You will bring 'the List' and come with us at once?"

I was told he could not come. An inspector must stay at his post. An inspector's post was the station.

But I clung to the hope he had inspired. What had he turned away for with that brisk air? My eyes went on before him, looking for the telephone he must be going to use; or an electric bell that should sound some great alarum, summoning a legion of police.

He had come back; he stood before us holding in his hand a piece of yellow paper. Precisely such a piece of paper as that on which already, there in Alton Street, the miserable story was set down. I shall not be believed, but this man, too, began to write on the glazed surface with a stump of blunt lead-pencil.

"*Don't* wait to write it all again!" I prayed. "Telephone for help. . . ."

But he, too, made little of the need for haste.

He, too, made much of what I had noticed as we left Victoria—the homely woman and the policeman watching as we drove away.

"You think," Mrs. Harborough said, "that the woman was suspicious?"

"No doubt—and no doubt the policeman was suspicious too." The inspector spoke with pride: "Oh, we get to know those people! They meet the trains. They're at the docks when ships come in."

It was then I saw that Mrs. Harborough could be stirred too. "If the policeman knew," she said—"if he so much as suspected, why did he not stop the motor?"

The inspector shook his head.

"Why didn't he arrest the woman?"

"He is not allowed," said the inspector.

I was sure he couldn't be telling us the truth. A creeping despair came over me. My first impression had been right. This man was too young, too ignorant, to help in such appalling trouble as ours. He was speaking kindly still. I might be sure they would do all they could to discover the house——

"When? When?"

And if they did discover it, he said, they would watch it.

"'*Watch it!*'" I could not think I had heard right. "You don't mean stand outside and wait! —while all the time inside——"

They tried to make me calmer. The inspector said, under certain circumstances, a warrant could be obtained to search the house. . . .

And was the warrant ready?

Everything possible would be done. Oh, the times they said that! Then the inspector, a little wearied, told Mrs. Harborough "it might be advisable to go and see the man who is in charge of all these cases."

Not only I, Mrs. Harborough heard him. For she repeated, "'All these cases!' You don't mean such a thing has happened before?"

"Oh, yes," the young man said. "But usually it's poor girls. This is the gentleman who has charge of all that." He turned and pointed to the left. Beyond a board where keys were hanging, under two crossed swords, the electric light shone clear on the picture of a man in an officer's uniform. A man wearing a sword and a cocked hat with plume—the sort of dress Lord Helmstone wore when he went to the King's Levée.

"When is he here?" Mrs. Harborough asked.

"Oh, he never comes here. He's at Scotland Yard."

"Scotland!" I cried.

They told me Scotland Yard was in London.

Then we'll go to Scotland Yard!

He wouldn't be at Scotland Yard now. "He *might* be there in the morning" . . . this man, in charge of all such cases!

The young inspector spoke his superior's name with awe. Oh, a person very great and powerful, and his hand was on his sword. I put my empty hands over my face and wept aloud.

Betty—Betty—who will help us?

* * * * *

I did not need their foolish words to realise, at last, that I should have as much help (*now*, when help was any good)—as much help from the sword in the picture as from this man with three stripes on his sleeve and the blunt lead-pencil in his hand.

Who was there in all the world who really cared?

A vision of my mother rose to stab at me.

No other friend? Eric!—as far away as heaven.

The inspector and the man in leather were lifting me into a cab. The electric light was fierce in their faces. Then the light and they were gone. We were driving in silence through streets of shadow sharply streaked with light. I crouched in the corner, and fought the flames that shrivelled up my flesh.

Torment! Torment!

Betty with a hundred faces. And every one a separate agony. Betty beginning to understand. Betty looking for her sister—calling out for me. No sister! No friend! Only the fiends of hell!

Torment! Torment!

I was crying fiercely again, and beating with clenched fists. I heard a crash.

The cab was stopped, and strange faces crowded. I was being held. "She has lost her mind," one said.

But no, it wasn't lost! It was serving me with devilish clearness. More pictures, and still more.

Well, well—Betty would die soon!

Like cool water—holy water—came the thought of death. Perhaps she was already dead. Oh, my God, make it true! Let her be dead!

Here was healing at last. Betty was dead!

CHAPTER XXXII

DARKNESS

BUT when the morning came I could not be sure that Betty was dead.

They brought me a telegram.

In wrenching the envelope off I tore the message twice. My fingers could hardly piece the signature together. I realised, at last, the Duncombe housemaid's name. My mother was sinking, she said; and we were expected back by the night train.

The message had been sent an hour after we left home. It reached Lowndes Square seven hours before I had come beating at the door. That it had lain in the hall forgotten seemed to me hardly to matter now. Not even to-day could I go home.

I seemed to see the future. If my mother had not died in the night, the end would very quickly come. There was mercy there.

As for me—I knew I should not die till I was sure that Betty was out of the world. As though to our best, our only friend, I turned to the thought of her physical weakness.

But I must be sure. I rose up out of my bed . . . and Darkness took me in her arms.

* * * * *

I was ill a long, long while.

Whenever a time came that found me free of fever, able to think again, what could I think except that, even if Betty were dead—there were the others.

The unhappy man had said that always, always there were others.

So I had seen " the need " wrong. The lamp of a young girl's hope, held up in her little world, to help her to find a mate—that light was pale beside the red glare of this fierce demand from men.

And the people who knew least went on saying it wasn't true. And the people who knew most said: there are many thousand " lost sisters " in London.

Who would help me to find mine?—or to sleep once more, knowing Bettina safely dead!

Nothing to hope from the foggy, self-bemused mystic, whose face alternated with that of the nurse in and out of my dreaming and my waking.

Long ago she had turned away from service, even from knowledge. There was "no evil, except as a figment of mortal mind." Peace! peace!—and this battle nightly at her gate! Just once her doors burst open, and she was made aware. The sound would soon be faint in her ears, and then would cease.

Who else?

Not her friend, the Healer—whose way of healing was to look away from the wound.

Could I trust even Eric to help? The man who had set his work before his love—who had said: "If all the people in the house were dying, if the house were falling about my ears and I thought I was 'getting it'—I'd let the house fall and the folks die and go on tracking the Secret home." Even if that were not quite seriously meant, no more than all the other good men and true, would that one leave the lesser task and set himself to cure this cancer at the heart of the world.

Eric, and all the rest (this it was that crushed hope out of my heart)—*they all knew.*

And they accepted this thing.

That was the thought that again and again tore me out of my bed, and brought the great Darkness down.

* * * * *

In the grey intervals I was conscious of Mrs. Harborough's being more and more in the room. I came to look for her.

She spoke sometimes of my father. She imagined I was like him. To think that made her very gentle and, I believe, brought her a kind of light.

I wondered about the doctor. How had she been brought to have someone tending me who did not call himself a Healer, yet who I felt might well have cured any malady but mine?

She had forbidden the nurse to talk to me about my sister, so that I was the more surprised the day Mrs. Harborough spoke of Betty of her own accord. " If you will try to get strong," she said, " I will tell you what has been done to find her. And when you are really well I will do all that any one woman can to help."

So we talked a little—just a little now and then, about the things I thought of endlessly. And not vaguely either. She saw how vagueness maddened me. We faced things. How she had misunderstood my mother. That could never be made up now. My mother never knew why we were not with her, nor even that we were not there. Consciousness had never come back to her. I heard of all that Eric had done, and that his was the last face she knew. He had stayed with her all that night, to the end.

There were letters for me from him. Soon, now, I should have my letters.

He had been many times to ask about me.

About *me!* What was he doing about . . . But no, that was for me alone. Up and down the streets I should go, looking into the eyes of outcasts under city lamps—looking for the eyes I knew.

Nor could I wait till I was well. Night by night I went upon the quest. Catching distant glimpses of Bettina in my dreams, struggling to reach her, for ever losing her in the turmoil of streets and the roar of stations, till the thought of Bettina was merged in overmastering terror of the noise and evil which was London.

The moment I was a little better they tried to get me to sleep without an opiate. The doctor made so great a point of this, I did all in my power not to disappoint him, and for no reason in the world but that something in his voice reminded me of Eric—just a little. Nobody knew how much of the time, behind closed eyes, my mind was broad awake. . . .

Oh, the London nights!—airless, endless. And the anguish of those haunted hours before dawn. My country ears, so used to silence or the note of birds, strained to interpret London sounds before break of day.

Hardly any honest, individual voices, and yet no moment quiet. Incessantly the distant rumbling of . . . *something*. I could never tell what. It was the roar of London streets by day, attenuated, held at bay, but never conquered—the bustle and clang muffled in the huge blanket of the night.

The strongest impression about it was just of the vague, unverifiable thing being *there*—an enemy breathing in the dark. Sometimes it started up with a rattle of chains.

" Mail-carts," said the nurse.

And that other sound—like one's idea of battering-rams thundering at fortress walls—the nurse would have me believe that to such an accompaniment did milk make entry into London! Sometimes the thick air was so sharply torn by horn, or pierced by whistle, that I would start up in my bed trembling, listening, till the dying clamour sunk once more to the level of the giant's breathing.

When I was not delirious, the reason I lay still was sometimes half a nightmare reason; a feeling that the muffled night-sounds were like the bees at home in the rhododendron, drumming softly so long as we sat still. The moment we rose up the bees rose too, with angry commotion, ready to fly in our faces and sting. Just so with that muted hum of London. If I were not very still, if I were to rise and venture out, all the stinging, angry noises would rise, too, and overwhelm me.

And out there in the heart of the swarm, Bettina. Being stung and stung, till feeling died.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A STRANGE STEP

One day, when my head was clearer, I seemed to have lain a great while waiting for someone to come. I asked where Mrs. Harborough was.

She was " engaged for the moment."

Presently I asked what kept her. The nurse rang and sent a message.

Mrs. Harborough came up at once. She had been talking to Mr. Annan, she said. And would I like to see him?

No. I shrank under the bedclothes, and turned my face to the wall.

An afternoon, soon after that, brought me the sudden clear sense of Eric's being again in the house. I was sure that he timed his visits so that he might see the doctor. When the doctor left the room that afternoon I asked if Mr. Annan had been again.

Yes; and did I want to see him now?

No.

" He has come to-day with another friend of yours," said Mrs. Harborough, lingering.

"One of the Helmstones?" I asked dully.

"No; Mr. Dallas."

Ranny! Ranny was downstairs. The happy, care-free people were going still about the world.

"Is he married?" I asked.

"Married?" Mrs. Harborough seemed surprised. Certainly, he seemed free to devote a great deal of time to us. Mr. Annan and he between them had left no means untried, she said.

"I have been told a thousand times," I interrupted, "that everything has been done, but no one ever tells me what." I fell to crying.

Looking more stirred than I had ever thought to see her, she told me that young Dallas had offered rewards, and had gone from place to place in search. . . .

I seized her hands. I made her sit by the bedside.

Yes, and always he had come back here, making his report and asking questions.

Eric brought the doctors and the nurses . . . but Ranny had done better. Ranny had stirred up Scotland Yard. When Eric told him the nurse had said I was for ever raving about barred windows, Ranny had flung out of my aunt's drawing-room and was gone a day and a night.

Yes, he came back. He had found the house. He got a warrant, and he went with the police when they made their search. He had seen the woman. She brazened it out. She had never heard of either Bettina or me.

My story? Oh, very possible, she said, that I and my sister had been "seeing life." No uncommon thing for young women to lie about their escapades. "Drugged?" the usual excuse.

The next day I asked them to let me see Ranny. They refused.

I did not sleep that night.

The doctor came earlier the next morning and was troubled. "What is it?" he said.

I told him. "I will promise to be very quiet," I said. I would promise anything if they would only let me see Ranny.

Mrs. Harborough went out and sent a message. Mr. Dallas was staying quite near, she said. But I waited for him for a thousand years. And then . . . a footstep on the stair.

My heart drew quivering back from the two-edged knife of Wanting-to-know and Dreading-to-know. Then all that poignancy of feeling fell to dulness, for the step was not Ranny's and not Eric's. I had never heard this slow, uncertain footfall.

The door opened, and it was Ranny.

He did not look at me.

His eyes went circling low, like swallows before rain. They settled on the coverlid till, slowly, he had come and stood beside me.

Then Ranny lifted his eyes . . .

Oh, poor eyes! Poor soul looking out of them!

" Ranny," I whispered, " speak to me."

" I have failed," he said. He leaned heavily against the chair.

" I have heard," I managed to say, " how hard you have been trying. . . ."

" But I have failed!" he said once more; and I hope I may never again hear such an accent.

I pointed to the chair . . . we could neither of us speak for a while. And then he cleared his throat.

" They took her out of that house and hid her," he said. " And then they took her abroad. I traced her to their house in Paris. But she had gone. Always I have been too late."

When I could speak I said: "You are a good friend, Ranny. . . ."

He made an impatient gesture. "Nothing is any good!" He stood up. "But I wanted you to know that I am trying. . . . Trying still. Nothing that you could do but I am doing it. Will you believe that?"

"But, Ranny," I said, "how can you do all this? Haven't you . . . other claims?"

"Other claims?" he said, as though he had never heard of them.

"You surely did have other claims?"

"I thought I had. But when this came I saw they were nothing." He stopped an instant near the door. "You don't believe I would lie to you?"

"No," I said.

"Then get well. *You* have something to live for. You and Annan. Not like me."

He went out with that strange-sounding step.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE END WHICH WAS THE BEGINNING

THEY were sorry they had let him come. A new night nurse was sent. Two doctors, now. And, either I dreamed it or, at the worse times, Eric was there as well. But always when I was myself, and the haunted night had given way to day, his face was gone. Yet his care was all about me. The doctors were friends of his; the nurses of his choosing.

I cannot explain why, but ferreting out these facts gave me something less than the comfort they might be thought to bring. Why was he troubling about me? Why was he not spending every thought and every hour in trying to find Bettina?

Ranny had meant it well, telling me I had something to live for besides Betty, and giving that something a name. But it was an ill turn; a sword in my side for many a day and night. It gave me a ceaseless smart of anger against Eric. I was jealous, too, that it had been Ranny, and not Eric, who had been taking all these journeys. Ranny had been working day and night. Ranny was the person we owed most to—Betty and I.

And was I to lie there, suffocated by all this care, and leave a boy like Ranny (a boy I had expected so little of) to spend himself, soul and substance, for my sister?

How dared Eric think that he and I were going to be happy, while Ranny searched the capitals of Europe, and while Bettina . . .

One night, or early morning rather, stands out clear.

Vaguely I remembered a renewed struggle, and a fresh defeat. Now, strangely, unaccountably, I had waked out of deep sleep with a feeling quite safe and sure, at last, that Betty was free.

The night-light had burned out. A pearly greyness filled the room.

The nurse was sitting by the window, wrapped in a shawl.

Her head, leaning against the window-frame, was thrown back as though to look at something.

I don't know whether it was the shawl drawn about drooped shoulders, or the association of a lifted face by the window, but I thought of the hop-picker. And of the promise I had made. Yes, and kept.

As long as I had been at Duncombe after that haggard woman passed, no other with my knowing had gone hungry away.

Not all suffering, then, was utterly vain.

What was the white-capped figure looking at—so steadily, so long?

I raised myself on my elbow, and leaned forward till I, too, could see. A tracery of branches, bare, against a clear-coloured sky; and through the crossing lines, a little white moon looked through its sky-lattice into the open window of my room.

I got up, so weak I had to cling hold of table and chair, till I stood by the nurse. She was asleep, poor soul! But I hardly noticed her then. I was looking up in a kind of ecstasy, for it seemed to me that a pale young face—not like the Bettina I had known, and still Bettina's face, was leaning down out of Heaven to bring me comfort.

But as I looked I saw there was high purpose as well as a world of pity in the face—as though she would have me know that not in vain her innocence had borne the burden of sin.

And I was full of wondering. Till, suddenly, I realised that not to comfort me alone, nor mainly, was Betty leaning out of heaven . . . *she was come to do for others what no one had done for her.*

Then the agony of the sacrifice swept over me afresh. I remembered I had gone back into that last Darkness saying, as I had said ten thousand times before: "Why had this come to Betty?"

And now again I asked: "Why had it to be you?"

Through the gentle grey of morning Betty seemed to be leading me into the Light. For the answer to my question was that the suffering of evil-doers had never been fruitful as the suffering of the innocent had been.

Was there, then, some life-principle in such pain?

A voice said: "You shall find in mortal ill, the seed of Immortal Good."

I knelt down by the window and thanked my sister.

Others shall thank her, too.

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